



Elizabeth Howe

The Cornish House

CHAPTER ONE “

“A century ago the journey from London

to Cornwall occupied something like forty hours.”

Ward Lock Guide, West Cornwall 1963

Half-an-hour out of Paddington the train to the West Country made its short pause at Reading to let a small group of people board. Anne Fellowes folded-up the documents she was re-reading, yet again, returned them to the stiff manila envelope, and slipped it inside her tan leather shoulder bag. There would be no more stops until they reached Exeter in Devon, deep into the southwest. Yet it was still not as far as she would travel today.

Oblivious to the brief stir of activity as passengers moved along the carriage she leaned back in her seat and stared out the window.

Once the station was in its wake the London-to-Penzance train began to pick-up speed. Somerset’s rolling hills and pastures flew past and England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ emerged from the congested dwellings and industrialized suburbs that surround London. In another five hours, some three-hundred-plus miles, she would be in St. Ives, almost at the tip of that sea-girt peninsula of Cornwall.

A long, long time had elapsed since last she was there. That unique land of her origins, and of countless happy summers spent there with her aunt.

As if in synchrony with the gathering speed of the train Anne began to gain a first faint glimmer of distancing. Where she was going Alan had never been, so could not feature in her memories of Cornwall. This past week spent in London had only encouraged her to keep reprising the immediate results of the past, until Aunt Vinnie, who had raised her, insisted she return to Cornwall.

‘You must devise your new future, Anne dear. Go stay at Lady House until I come down to join you. I know it will help to change your perspective.’

Alan’s lawyers had presented the divorce papers a week before she left Connecticut and flew to London. All she needed to do was sign and return them. Yet she delayed. She lost track of how many times she had studied the precise wording and conditions, the dispassionate text that neatly dissolved twenty-seven years of marriage.

At least she would retain the house in Westport; a bone of contention since the recession had affected Alan’s electronic company. Her pride

wanted nothing more. Their jointly owned stocks, her own few solely held shares in Fellowtron, and every cent of his income, he could keep. Just the house had she argued for. Their modest but pleasant home on East Ferry Lane seemed a last bastion of stability to hold onto; along with her college library job.

But she had suddenly felt stifled; changed in status but still stuck-in-place. So strong was the urge to leave that within mere days she had closed-up the house, packed a bag, secured three months leave of absence from the college, paid the bills ahead, and booked a flight to London. Swift effort for careful, cautious Anne Fellowes, who had always planned ahead, weeks in advance of any project!

Emotional recriminations were all voiced months ago and her anger was spent. Alan's alliance with his young accountant, Linda Mitvalsky, was finally accepted. Just the hurt lingered; and a needling sense of failure as a wife, as a woman. The futile wondering how she might be responsible. Though both sons and their wives were sympathetic, her friends duly outraged and supportive in equal parts, her neighbors surprised but understanding, a stigma of failure remained. At fifty-three it was easy to feel cast-aside; as an elegant dress that had gone out of fashion, or a once lovely desert now a bedraggled left-over from last night's grand party.

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Ever intent on avoid self-pity Anne reached across the small table of her train seat for the newspaper she had purchased at Paddington. When she saw an International Herald Tribune she became curious for news from home after a week away. Quickly browsing the front page headlines this Tuesday, May 10th, 1994, she noted the slow recovery from the recent economic downturn across the nation.

‘Would you like a drink, Madam?’

Drawn from a report on problems at high-tech companies she looked up at the young man behind a drinks trolley. A friendly smile, the healthy blush of the outdoors on his face, matched the soft Cornish burr in his voice.

‘A nice Scotch and soda, perhaps? Or some Sherry?’

Sensing indecision by her pause, his enthusiastic suggestions almost made Anne smile. She thought of how her health-conscious friends back in Westport would react to the offer of hard spirits at eleven in the morning.

‘Just coffee, please – no cream or sugar.’

That backward glance, and the newspaper she held, crystallized her vague sense all week of straddling two cultures. Each embodied their

affinities to time and place. America only very slowly became “home” after she and Alan arrived in 1964, and raised their boys, Jonathan and Peter. Return trips to England had been few, essentially to meet and gain business prospects, or visit his relatives in Birmingham; with occasional brief travels in Europe.

Yet this past week spent with Vinnie tended to resurrect their shared background, and all its memories. The familiar spacious flat in St. John’s Wood was her home when she turned eight. Her mother’s unmarried older sister, Isabelle Vincula Stratton, had lovingly raised her there after the death of her parents in a car accident. But while her attachment to London was entrenched, first as a schoolgirl, then as a working woman, later as Alan’s fiancee, the old anchors had slipped away. The city still held its charm but she was distanced now from its heartbeat, an outsider, a tourist.

As Anne watched the steward pour her coffee a sudden impulse arose, sweeping moody reflections aside: a little bubble of independence and the urge to reassert herself. Now she was back in the land of her origins she could certainly indulge its customs. A drink before lunch was still a tradition here, one she had just recently shared with her aunt.

‘Oh . . . I’ll have a Sherry too.’

‘Excellent! Very good, Madam.’

Anne felt cheered by this hearty endorsement of her choice, along with her new-found glimmer of identity. While the transfer of cup and saucer, glass, tiny Sherry bottle, and money took place, her glance drifted along the carriage.

Half-way down and across the aisle a woman sat looking at her in deep concentration. It was the same woman she had brushed against while stowing her suitcase after boarding.

As their eyes met Anne acknowledged the woman's quick friendly smile with a slight nod of her head. Looking away she unscrewed the cap of the miniature bottle of Sherry, filled the small glass, then paused. Anne felt the strangest sensation, as thought her thoughts were visible and had been read. It took but a second to dismiss the notion as fanciful. Brushing away a spilled droplet off the table with a paper napkin she leaned forward with both elbows propped and gave her attention to the view outside as she sipped the sweet smoky wine.

Shafts of sunlight now pierced the gray overcast, to a meadow where a flock of sheep and their sooty-faced lambs grazed; a thatched farmhouse with broad brick chimneys flashed past. In a world that had changed for her this enduring feature of the landscape was welcome. Each passing mile seemed to bring a sense of return, a retreat to a solid unchangeable past.

After another quick glance at the woman across the aisle, who was now turned away and busily conversing with her companions, Anne recalled the incident when they had briefly connected.

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As suitcases were lifted into the rack at the front of the carriage, arms and shoulders met. In the chill morning air a momentary exchange of body warmth occurred. And also something more: an electric current, a flow of chemistry, a charged static. An invisible flash, then it was gone.

‘Sorry! That was clumsy of me.’

Anne’s perfunctory apology caused the younger woman to turn her head, so she felt obligated to look at her. Large expressive eyes were not dark brown as she first thought, but an unusual hue, of the darkest deepest blue. Her mass of wavy black hair reflected a bluish sheen too as it caught glints from the light in the cubicle.

‘You’re not clumsy, m’dear. It’s the excitement. You are going home again, at last.’

Each had continued pushing their bags farther onto the shelf. It took Anne a few seconds for the woman’s response to register.

‘Oh. No, I’m really not . . . it’s just a short visit for me.’

Even as she spoke Anne wondered why she need clarify the purpose of her journey. To a stranger. But that steady dark blue gaze seemed to have elicited a compelling honesty from her. Aware that the woman's two female companions had already moved along the carriage she supposed they had been up to London for a shopping-and-theatre jaunt. Eager now to be headed home, with their big-city purchases, rich tales of adventures.

All shared a similarity in appearance except for minor differences in height or coloring. Trim but sturdy bodies, clear complexions that owed little to make-up. And a subtle air, a composure, of genial self-sufficiency. Something she recalled from the past. There is a 'look' that tends to define Celts from the rest of their island counterparts, an invisible mantle of innate confidence. It often puzzles the 'up-country' visitors to that rugged, scenic, but certainly less sophisticated region, the Duchy of Cornwall.

Anne had straightened up and was turning to leave when she felt a hand reach out and come to rest on her arm to gently restrain her.

'But that's not what I'm seeing for you. You've been gone a long time. But now you're going back . . . and now there is a -'

The soft cadence of her voice suddenly halted. A gentle smile started to alter the earnest expression of her features. Her next words were spoken with two gentle pats to the arm.

‘Not to worry at all, m’dear. Everything will go well for you now . . . you’ll see.’

Anne stood there for a moment after the woman turned and moved away to join her friends. Then after a quick mental shrug she too walked down the carriage to look for her reserved seat on the Cornish Riviera Express.

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Devon’s red earth, high hedgerows, and tumbled gray crags replaced Somerset’s gentle rolling pastures as the train sped on. Blue skies prevailed as their direction consistently bore west-southwest. The increasing distance from London found a relaxed mood beginning to permeate the carriage. Discreet smiles were exchanged. The bucolic landscape was diminishing the human barriers which urban concrete density seemed to instill.

Noon passed and the first luncheon sitting in the dining car was ending before Anne unwrapped her sandwiches of leftover roast chicken from the dinner she had helped prepare last night. Dining out had lately lost its delight, though she and Vin had done so on several occasions. She had truly preferred to stay home at night. Her aunt’s eclectic art and furnishings,

the stylishly comfortable flat, had been a welcome buffer, a necessary interlude, before she tackled the prospect of the years ahead of her.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, Exeter St. David’s will be the next stop, passengers changing for Torquay, Teignmouth . . .’

Anne stifled a yawn. The warm sun through the window was making her drowsy and she decided to visit the toilets. As the announcement droned on she rose, spotting Powderham Castle from the window across the aisle. That attractive old edifice stood on its grassy knoll and a herd of deer still foraged its parkland. Some things had stayed the same.

Tugging the beige wool gabardine suit skirt around her waist she tucked in the ivory silk blouse and began a balanced walk through the swaying carriage. Months of stress and worry had loosened all her clothes on an already slim figure. The low-heeled pumps did little to elevate her five-foot-three-inch stature. And while Vinnie believed women should maintain a sleek elegance through the years – as she herself had – Anne had been urged to eat more. ‘The Cornish air and food will improve your appetite at least, my girl.’

As she slowly passed by the seats of the three Cornish women, still immersed in animated conversation with each other, she was aware that one had paused and had discreetly looked up at her as she went by.

Replacing the lid on the tube of pink lipstick Anne studied her reflection in the glass over the basin. A passably attractive image stared back. Fair complexion with only faint indentations that were not really lines yet, regular features and a generous mouth. She was pleased the dark shadows beneath her gray-blue eyes had begun to fade. Her fingers pushed a natural wave off her forehead and she wondered how it would look if left to grow out. Vinnie had promptly deemed her short severe style ‘symbolic female castration response.’ They had shared a good laugh about it. The ash blonde color was mouse-drab now – from lack of sunlight and general distress she supposed – but it would brighten-up again.

She recalled her adversary, the tall, brown-eyed Linda with glossy brunette tresses which swung down her back. Wrinkling her nose she made a face in the mirror and quickly gathered up her purse, unlocked the door, and returned to her seat.

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CHAPTER TWO

*“To visit Cornwall is to travel beyond the pale of the commonplace,
into practically another country . . . it is in England. . . not of it.”*

Ward Lock Guide, West Cornwall 1963.

The train followed the ever-widening estuary of the River Exe as it flowed towards the Channel and the scenery became maritime: small boats, scatters of gulls, lone figures with fishing rods on the tidal flats. Anne closed her eyes letting the next hour pass in drowsy serenity.

At Plymouth the vacant gray platform was soon transformed into colorful activity as the train lost many of its passengers. An invasion by a modern armada, equipped with suitcases, umbrellas, shopping bags, and backpacks. Anne watched as a few, less-encumbered commuters, waited to board: probably workers at the once historic but-now-declining port, and students from the city's progressive colleges, returning home. It was a short time before the train continued its journey.

When the train steadied to an even pace for its stately glide across the Tamar River, Anne leaned forward with mounting interest. Sun sparkled off the waters beneath Brunel's iron span. Along the far shore, stone cottages huddled above the waters edge at Saltash. The boundary was reached, then passed, and they entered into that other land.

A faint susurration ran along the carriages. Holiday-makers eagerly looked out at their chosen far-off destination for the next few weeks, or days. In the dining car the staff began to laugh and tease each other as they cleaned-up: the ticket inspector strode down the cars again with a smile and a jaunty quip at the ready. Anne knew, not only the train's crew felt gladdened to return: every native Cornishman and woman had just breathed a little sigh of content.

‘D’you mind if I sit and chat with you for a while?’

Surprised, Anne looked up at the dark-haired woman of earlier contact.

‘No – no, not at all.’

She was undoubtedly a friendly soul – but it was odd how she seemed to keep wanting to talk to her.

‘I live in Falmouth, so Truro’s where I get off to catch the branch line. Is it Penzance that you are going to?’

‘Yes. Well nearly, I change at St. Erth, for St.Ives.’

‘Ah . . . St.Ives.’ She smiled. ‘My name’s Beryl Penrose, by the way.’

Anne smiled back. ‘Mine’s Anne umm – Fellowes.’

How strange. She almost said ‘Martin.’ Was it the return to Cornwall or Beryl’s voice that made memory slip her back to her single status.

Beryl Penrose inclined her head with a nod. ‘Nice to meet you Anne. And you’re Cornish, aren’t you?’

With a bemused smile, Anne wondered how the deduction was made. It was along time since she thought of herself in that context.

‘My mother was Cornish. And I was born here – in Padstow. But London is where I grew up.’

‘I thought so.’ Beryl complacently replied. ‘But not your father?’

‘No, his family were Welsh. He came here as a child.’

Beryl laughed. ‘Well! That’s the link, all right. It was the other way round for me, mum was Welsh and my dad Cornish.’

The deep blue eyes shone with merriment at Anne’s look of uncertainty.

‘Don’t you see? It’s true Brythonics we are, the pair of us!’

At Anne’s failure to react she explained, ‘Brythonic is a branch of Celt. There are three.’ Then added, ‘I took my MA in Anthropology. University of Sussex.’

Anne raised her brows in a non-verbal salute. It was obvious Beryl’s education was as solid as her Cornish accent. Then she quickly recalled that today a regional dialect was encouraged rather than scorned.

‘But that’s all by-the-by.’ Beryl continued. ‘What I really wanted to explain to you is . . . that I’m also psychic.’

Anne felt certain the doubt was inscribed all over her features, that her chatty new companion did not require supernatural powers to read it. The train had slowed again and a brief glance sideways showed they had reached

Par. Only one more stop before Truro – where she could politely say goodbye.

‘If it makes you feel more comfortable – I also took a degree in Psychology.’

Far from daunted by Anne’s silence, Beryl seemed merely amused, as she allowed the long pause to continue.

Then with a wry grin, ‘Hey, it isn’t exactly fortune-telling, you know. If it were, I’d never have ended-up with my first husband!’

Anne mustered a smile, trying to remember all she had read about psychic ability. But just the image of neon-lit hands in modest windows came to mind, so she demurred.

‘Well . . . I mean . . . do you, er . . .’

‘Make a business from it? No, I don’t. It’s mostly the fakes and phonies do that. But I have helped the police occasionally – when they ask me to. If someone goes missing, usually.’

Beryl waited while Anne considered this, calmly expecting her next comment.

‘When did you . . . first know?’

‘By age six or seven, thereabouts. It does run in my family. My Welsh Gran had ‘the sight’ as it used to be called. But “know” is the wrong

word to use. It isn't something you control, produce on demand. It sometimes happens, or else it doesn't.'

With sudden clarity Anne realized why Beryl Penrose was sitting there across from her. Her companion slowly nodded as she saw in Anne's eyes the connection slide into place.

'And you saw something . . . with me?'

'Yes, I did. Back there at Paddington, when we touched. That's how it usually happens, incidentally, by touch. A strong channel opened up. I was surprised you didn't sense it too. But – you seemed a bit distracted.'

They looked at each other now in a mutually comfortable silence. Anne felt they occupied a private cocoon of space on the moving train. She waited, not dubious anymore, certain that Beryl would casually, confidently, explain something. In her own good time.

'It's a house that I saw. An old house . . . and with something special about it. I saw it as a place that protects you. But – it's important that you understand why.' She paused. 'Is it a house you are going to now?'

Anne's answer lapsed into the same quiet rhythm of Beryl's voice. 'Yes. To my aunt's house. Which I only remember seeing from the outside, a long time ago . . . but I've never stayed there before.'

With a gentle smile Beryl nodded. ‘Sometimes we have to go back before we go forward.’

The tranquil interlude was suddenly broken by a blast of the whistle as the train started to brake. The tracks rounded the high ridge over the city and the three spires of St. Mary’s Cathedral swept into view below them.

Beryl calmly picked-up her handbag. ‘Here’s Truro, so I’d best be on my way.’ Reaching into the bag she brought out a white card and put it on the table in front of Anne.

‘If you’d like to meet-up for lunch or tea sometime, give me a call. My sister-in-law lives at Carbis Bay, so I’m often over there on a visit.’

And she was gone. In a few minutes Anne watched as the three women walked past the windows, laughing together, under the baskets of red geraniums and blue impatiens that hung from the platform’s columns.

Half-an-hour later Anne lazily stretched her arms above her head when the whistle for St. Erth sounded. The time had passed in tranquil contemplation as the once familiar topography flowed by: tilted green fields with granite outcroppings, crumbling ivy-strewn chimneys – sentinels of the vanished tin mines that once proliferated this area.

Eager now to complete the journey she thought about a long hot bath, followed by a glass of chilled white wine – perhaps even *with* it. After

retrieving her suitcase from the rack, she stepped out onto a deserted platform at the tiny station, into a scene frozen in time. After four decades not much had changed. There were still rose bushes in the beds along the platform and it was hard to shake the thought they were the same ones she and Vinnie used to admire.

Relieved to be outside and ambulatory again Anne walked briskly toward the overhead bridge connecting the two branch line platforms. A salt-laden breeze off the Atlantic helped brush away the last cobwebs from the journey.

Already it felt good to be back. Vinnie might be right, bless her. From where she was now the rest of the world seemed far enough away to forget, for a while. With a sudden stab of irrational pleasure she also realized something else. Alan had never visited Cornwall. While the suggestion had often been made over the years, he always had other plans for family holidays. This meant no memories of him could cloud the time she spent here. Cornwall remained solely her own territory.

The local train huffed its two short carriages into the station, and as swiftly huffed out again. The next twelve minutes would be one of the prettiest of rides. After Lelant and the tidal salttings of the Hayle estuary were negotiated, the tracks climbed upwards to hug the cliffs and the train

rounded the curve to reveal the broad expanse of a sunlit blue ocean. The half-moon bay of St. Ives lay ahead, in all its picturesque charm. Anne gave a contented sigh as she thought how, for more than a hundred years or so, its colonies of resident artists repeatedly tried to capture this unique light and the colors.

Rimmed by golden sands, lapped by the multiple-hued blues of the Atlantic, terraces of little houses tumbled down to the harbor, where still a few fishing boats swayed to the incoming tide. And all was washed by the golden light of late afternoon. Anne was sure the town had especially presented itself at its very best – to welcome her back.

‘Lady House is it? Miss Stratton’s place? She’ll be coming back this summer, won’t she? You wouldn’t be her niece, by any chance – the one who lives in America?’

As the taxi turned out of the station and headed away from the town towards Carbis Bay, Anne forced herself to suppress the desire to burst into laughter. She had resisted Vinnie’s idea of calling her local solicitor friend to collect her from the train, feigning a necessity to be alone, become adjusted. Also negated had been having Peter Laity’s son at the nearby farm pick her up. Firmly she had said she preferred to take a local cab for the short journey.

‘Yes, she’ll be back sometime in June. And you’re right – I’m her niece.’

Forgotten was how well Cornish bush radio operated, though it wasn’t really hard to trace the networking. Aunt Vin had called Martha at the farm, who looked after the house, who shopped at the bakery, which was owned by a cousin of . . . it was just the speed of it all still amazed. But in remote Penwith, in this small town, knowing who-was-who had been a cultural necessity for centuries. Not too long ago survival had once depended on knowing who the visitors were.

‘Well, goodness me. Back for a visit, are ye? From America. And the weather turned right loovely for’ee too. How long will ye be staying then?’

Anne sighed. ‘Oh, for about two months.’

‘Back to America then, is it? You’ll see a few changes ‘ere, I reckon.’ To quickly forestall another barrage of questions Anne decided to ask a few of her own. Easily diverting the cheerfully garrulous young man she gained an update on local doings, and on the building of the new Tate Gallery that had just been opened over Porthmeor Beach. Vinnie had insisted Anne make it one of her first visits.

The driver chatted on as the cab left the coast road, turning into a narrow hedge-rowed lane. Anne could see it had been newly asphalted and she sat up straighter to catch the first sight of the stone gateposts that her memory suddenly recalled; the surviving markers of a once formal entry, they were now almost covered by honeysuckle, ivy, and foxgloves. But not a trace of the rusted double wrought iron gates remained, that used to lean drunkenly against the hedges.

The cab swung into the wide gap in the hedge and they proceeded another three to four hundred yards, to where a curving avenue began lined with trees. Tall old elms and beeches now had occasional gaps between their green and bronze canopies; casualties of extreme age rather than Atlantic winter gales, for the area they were now in, was protected. A track of granite pebbles, now thinly scattered, wound gently down into a circular depression. And on a mounded rise at the center of the natural bowl stood the house, a small and graceful Georgian manor.

When the house came into focus it was with a pleasant shock. Anne had either forgotten, or not noticed years ago, how it sat with an air of solitary permanence. As though it had always stood there, always would. Yet Lady House was a recent dwelling by some yardsticks, built about two hundred years ago. It was the site itself that implied a more ancient domain,

back beyond recorded history. The nearby farm and surrounding fields lay inland from the sea, thus were secluded, protected from the wind; and also from invaders. Anne was suddenly reminded how this tin-rich granite headland of West Penwith had been known to ancient Mediterranean traders: their presence lost in time, if not entirely from the genes perhaps. The later marauders that had come from Rome, Turkey, Spain, and France were modern history.

‘Lo-o-vely little place, isn’t it? And there’s Martha waitin’ for‘ee. Enjoy ye visit, m’dear. Ye need to go anywhere, jes’ gimmee a ring!’

The taxi drove off with a wave from the driver. Anne picked up her bag and turned to meet the smiling woman at the door, quickly dropping the key in her hand back inside her purse.

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CHAPTER THREE

*“ . . . There is divinity in odd numbers,
either in nativity, chance or death”*

’A Midsummer Night’s Dream,’ Wm. Shakespeare

Wearing faded jeans and a loose beige sweater, and holding a glass of Chardonnay, Anne stood and listened at the open kitchen door. The sibilant hums, chirrups, faint noises, were all country sounds. Of subtle hidden busy-ness that soothed but did not intrude. An almost silence that alleviated absolute solitude. She tilted her head and reflected how it was only at times like this we become fully aware of other life, teeming around us. It was so good to be alone at last. Her entire day had been spent among other people, calling for necessary conversation. Here, now, nothing required her attention or involvement.

The walled garden that lay beyond the covered porch of the kitchen door, had three apple trees, several rows of vegetables, and a sizable spread

of fruit canes that deserved her inspection in a few minutes. There could be raspberries, gooseberries, and even her absolute favorite, black currants. They might ripen before she had to leave and go back to Westport.

Newly energized from a bath, she had unpacked and hung-up her clothes; promised Martha she would eat the contents of the soup pot on the range for supper; and dutifully called Vinnie to assure her she arrived without hitches – and, yes, already felt very snug.

In truth she was already strangely attuned to the house. Its charm had immediately been felt on first entering, and its spare elegant homey-ness pleased her. The polished brown tiles of the wide hallway were dappled by yellow light streaming down from the landing window over the stairs. There was a steady muted tick from the grandfather clock. A trace of lavender-scented furniture polish hung in the air – undoubtedly from Martha's recent efforts. So far she had only glimpsed in all the rooms while Martha explained where lights were located, how the television worked. Downstairs were two lounges and a big kitchen, upstairs –three bedrooms and a utility room. One bathroom above and a powder room off the hall.

Her bedroom was one of the two largest, at the front of the house, with bright curtains, quilt, and upholstery in a geometric pink-and-beige cotton fabric: on an old oak table stood a big blue jug of roses from the

garden. Tomorrow she would explore in detail and discover the places to curl-up with a book, write letters, just sit and think.

Where she was now, she believed, might be where she spent most of her time. The kitchen was light and spacious. It had a fireplace and two comfortable armchairs, a big dining table that could seat eight, and a huge old dresser. Vinnie had recently redecorated the house, installing the latest cabinets and appliances. When Anne had admired the narrow arched door, with the big iron key on a peg beside it, Martha told her it was to the old cellar of the original kitchen, which her aunt had preserved for its antique appeal. The beveled granite archway and the age-smooth oak of the door was an attractive locus among the modern fittings of the room.

‘But don’t you be fussin’ to see that musty old place, Miss Anne, it’s all spiders and tricky steps down. Miss Stratton uses the attic to store things. Tho’ ye’ll not need that, seein’s the little you have with you!’

Martha had left promising to arrive at ten each morning, with milk and bread, and whatever else Anne wanted from the farm shop, and then to ‘tidy-up.’

‘Jus’ like I do when Miss Stratton’s here.’ But not until Anne insisted they use only their first names with each other.

A round-faced cheerful woman in her late-fifties, graying hair neatly pinned in a bun, Martha was Peter Laity's sister. Now widowed she lived in a small cottage at the farm. Together with Peter's wife, Rose, she helped manage the shop and the two bedrooms that were let-out to holiday boarders. Anne suspected Martha busied herself for the community at large every bit as much as the farm. She was aware that Vin generously supplemented her annual income. Anne believed the daily visits would provide a welcome diversion, and save her from too much introspection.

Tonight she would enjoy a quiet evening and retire early. It was still light out so a walk in the garden was a good idea, before heating the soup pot and maybe listening to the evening news. In a peaceful frame of mind Anne walked out through the porch onto the stone flags that led into the garden.

The sharp sound brought her to an abrupt halt and destroyed the mood of serenity. Holding her breath she let the stab of alarm subside. The sound came again. Concern overcame the initial fear as she looked around. To her left was a covered stone coping that projected a few feet out from the kitchen wall. This seemed to be where the sounds emanated, now identified as urgent growls. With careful steps she approached the concealed access to the shelter, then leaning around she peeked inside. Three steps led down to

a blocked entry, which could have been an outer door to the old cellar at one time, and opposite on a flat area –

The wineglass slipped from her hand and shattered on the flagstones. To a frenzy of hysterical barks . . . and whimpers. On a piece of folded sacking a Welsh Border Collie bitch trembled all over, with bared teeth. Against her swollen belly a huddle of tiny eyeless new-born pups squirmed, two of them still slick and wet from their recent arrival into the world.

‘Oh, you poor darling – it’s all right, it’s all right, I won’t hurt you.’

Anne bent to retrieve the largest pieces of glass. ‘And where on earth did you come from?’

Momentarily dazed she continued to stare at the attractive black-and-white animal, who warily eyed her with defensive growls. ‘All right, all right. I know.’ With a slow gentle movement Anne stood upright and backed away. Then she hurried back inside the kitchen. On the scrubbed whitewood table stood a fresh loaf of bread. She opened the refrigerator and reached for the bottle of milk on the top shelf. Using her finger nails to prise off the foil cap she set it beside the range to look for a saucepan. In minutes she had poured in some milk to heat, cut two slices off the loaf, found a

bowl into which she tore the bread into pieces, and then added the warm milk. She briefly thought of sugar then remembered it was bad for dogs.

Carrying the bowl back to the sheltered enclosure she placed it on the ground to a renewed spate of growls. Gently edging it closer and closer towards the snarling black nose she waited, murmuring, 'There, there, there.'

Not daring to move she watched the nose quiver and then the tip of a pink tongue emerge to take a few delicate laps of milk. Still crouched in a squat Anne experienced a surge of triumph when the bitch's tail gave a few flaps. She had won its approval, if not acceptance.

'You were a silly girl . . . picking an empty house for this sort of thing. It's a good thing I arrived today.'

Pleased that the dog had quieted down Anne wondered if it might be one of the farm dogs. The fact that it looked otherwise fit and cared-for, and considering its breed, that seemed logical. She would have to walk over there and find out. Even if it proved to be a stray they would certainly be able to help. Gathering-up a few more shards of glass Anne noticed a stoneware bowl near the wall, empty except for some dry leaves. She carefully rose to retrieve it. The collie might be thirsty after the milky slops and it could well be dark before she returned.

Back in the kitchen she washed the bowl before filling it with fresh water. It was a few moments before its provenance, and the folded sacking in the recess, finally registered. If her aunt was used to having a dog around she had not mentioned it. Perhaps it did belong to the farm and was accustomed to following Martha over. The collie might have followed her here today, and if so she had misjudged her timing for the happy event. But that happened to a lot of females.

Unbidden memories swept in of Paul and Adam as children, and the dog she and Alan had brought home from the local animal shelter. A big lovable yellow mongrel they called ‘Swindon,’ after the Wiltshire town where Alan’s first major client was based. She was the one who had mourned ‘Swindon’ longest when old age claimed him in his sleep. They had never kept another animal. The company grew bigger and Alan needed freedom from any distractions to his work. When she returned to Westport perhaps she would get another dog. They were good companions, with better dispositions than most people – and were definitely more loyal.

Leaving the back door open Anne started to walk around to the front of the house to use the gate in the garden wall. It seemed unnecessary to close doors much less lock them during the day in these parts. At least that

was how it used to be. Perhaps she would ask Martha tomorrow if life had changed much here too, as it had everywhere else.

It was then she remembered, she could have telephoned instead: Martha had shown her the book in the dresser drawer with all the local numbers. By then she had reached the boulder-lined hedge and a stepped-style that led to a field. And in it she saw a tractor slowly ambling toward a barred gate of the lane that led to Tregweir Farm.

With a nimble leap she scaled the style and jumped down on the other side. Raising both arms above her head she had started to run towards it when a sudden movement at the edge of her vision brought her to a halt.
‘Hi there – any way I can be of help?’

As a tall figure came upright and detached itself from the tangle of the hedge Anne gasped in surprise. Of equal surprise was the acute rush of anger she experienced at his sudden appearance. Not only had he intruded on her purpose, the haven of Lady House had been violated – he was standing right alongside the property line. A trespasser! It was a bit early in the season, and late in the day, to be innocently hiking around the countryside.

Dressed in casual, if somewhat disheveled slacks and jacket, in particular she noted the broad-brimmed canvas hat on his head, which looked battered and stained as if from long use. And from the growth of bristles around his chin he had not bothered to shave for at least three days. What seemed to be an extra large pad of paper was now being tucked under his arm.

‘No there isn’t! I’m obviously trying to attract the farmer over there!’

She heard the anger in her words with curiosity but no feeling of guilt. It was so unlike her normal composure, which she was able to maintain even when confronted by hostility in others.

The stranger showed no visible reaction. He simply placed two fingers in his mouth. The shrieking whistle that emerged was the sort that could have stopped traffic in Times Square.

Anne turned to look at the center of the field. The tractor driver, sure enough, had heard it because he looked around. She saw him angle the machine sideways and then bring it to a stop, the sound of the engine fading. Without bothering to look back at the stranger she took off at a run across the uneven turf. As she came nearer the driver climbed down, removed his

cloth cap, scratched his head, and put it back. With a puzzled expression he stood and waited for her.

‘Hello – are you Peter Laity?’

‘Aye, that I am.’

‘I’m Anne Fellowes – Vin Stratton’s niece . . . at Lady House?’

‘O’aye! Nice that ye’ve arrived. Martha’s right glad you’ve come. Loves it when yer aunty’s there, she does. D’ye have a problem?’

Anne nodded, breathless. ‘I arrived late this afternoon, Mr. Laity. But – there’s a dog in the back garden, a Welsh Border Collie. She’s just had a litter of puppies. Is she one of yours, or a stray?’

Laity threw back his head with a laugh. ‘O’Lordy me, that’ll be our Millybegs! Knew she was due soon. Don’t ‘ee worry, I’ll get the wife over d’rectly. Darn dog’s always trotting over there she is, never understood why, we haven’t. Our others never wander.’

‘Oh good!’ Anne smiled in relief. ‘And I’ve just . . . given her some bread and warm milk. Was that all right, do you think?’

‘Ah tha’s all right. Spoilin’ her ye be. ‘Ow many young’uns she ‘ave, then? Did ye count?’

‘Yes I did. She has seven. At least that’s how many before I left.’

‘Sounds ‘bout right, it’s ‘er first litter ye see. I’ll go get Rosey m’wife over there now.’

‘Oh, thank you.’ Anne said.

‘Will ye be staying awhile, Miss Anne? Be company for your aunt when she comes here. Not tha’ she needs it like – never saw such an active lady.’

Anne grinned. ‘I know what you mean. She can even wear me out.’

Peter Laity straightened the cap on his head and took a step back towards the tractor. Anne raised her hand in a wave and turned to go, then spun around.

‘Oh, wait! There’s a man over there by the hedge – isn’t he trespassing?’

Peter Laity smiled. ‘No-o, Miss Anne, ‘e be the artist chap that was lodgin at the farm with us ‘til last week. He’s rented a cottage down in St. Ives.’

Anne frowned as she absorbed this information. For some odd reason she was vexed that the stranger’s presence was so well accepted.

‘Don’t worry about ‘im, Miss Anne. Nice fella ‘e is. From America too. Always asks when ‘e wants to come here, to make some drawin’s, like.’

With a little nod she turned and walked away. In all the excitement she had failed to notice that he had indeed spoken with an American accent. In fact his whole manner and style had been familiar to her, now that she thought about it, but out of place. Either today had been more stressful than she thought . . . or she had simply overreacted.

At a slower pace she recrossed the field to where the style was located. Nearing it she looked both ways along the hedge. There was no sign of him.

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The clock on the nightstand showed it was almost eleven before she finally pulled back the blankets from her bed. Sitting on the edge for a moment she yawned from genuine tiredness. The evening had not been a dull one.

When Rose, and Martha too, arrived in the Landrover she had watched as Rose gently scooted Millybegs and her seven pups onto a thick layer of old towels they had brought, amid laughs and soothing comments. The wayward collie not only failed to growl at them, Anne could have sworn she looked downright smug. After she offered to hold one of the corners and help carry it to the Landrover they persuaded her to accompany them back to the farm. That way she would not only see the farm but also help bed

Millybegs down in her proper – and perfectly comfortable – quarters in the barn.

They had then insisted she stay and join them all for dinner, which was a large pastry-covered casserole of chicken, with freshly picked broccoli. When Peter arrived he passed jugged cider around, to celebrate Millybegs achievement, and Anne's arrival among them. Time had slipped away in casual talk and humorous stories about animals and people. When their youngest son, Josh, drove her back to Lady House she stowed the soup pot in the refrigerator for tomorrow; and heeded Martha's precaution to lock all the doors before going upstairs. Anne switched out the lamp and climbed under the covers. Tomorrow would be a peaceful day.

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CHAPTER FOUR

'The palpable presence of the gods, once felt, is always remembered and can, when we need it, place a heavy spear in our hand.'

The Earth, The Temple, And The Gods: Vincent Scully

Pit-pit-pit . . . pit-pit-pit. The faint sounds drew nearer. It was now time to leave. She watched the small bronzed hands lift the gleaming lunata onto a rough linen cloth. With nimble graceful movements they folded it, again, then once more before placing it into the wooden box that was on the granite table.

Slim dusky hands with narrow fingers tapering to delicate tips. She could still feel their cool impress upon her neck and shoulders. Could still feel the calm serenity they imparted.

Eddies of white smoke tinged with blue spiraled up as wicks were snuffed in the little stone bowls. The oil left a sweet musky scent that pervaded the chamber. Pit-pit-pit-pit-pit . . .

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Anne pushed the quilt away from her face, slowly opening her eyes to the grey light of morning. At the windows the white organdy curtains blew gently inwards. She remembered now opening the windows a few inches before climbing into bed last night.

With a smile of contentment she stretched her arms above her head. What a wonderfully restful sleep. Now she could smell the rain-fresh air that carried a scent of brine, of sand and seaweed. She breathed in deeply a few times, savoring the once familiar breeze off the Atlantic which brought back memories. So many carefree holidays spent in Cornwall long ago, with Aunt Vin. It felt good to be back.

After another luxurious stretch she gazed around the room in pleasurable ease realizing the day ahead was all her own, to spend any way she chose. Far from caring that yesterdays' promised sunshine was missing, Anne felt relieved. The rain made a good excuse for staying inside, to

explore the house more fully, to lounge, or even to read. A glance at the clock on the bedside table showed it was just six-thirty. The old saying was recalled, “Rain before seven, Clear before eleven.” So the afternoon might include other options.

Anne realized that for the first time in ages, her sleep had truly been sound and deep. With no dreams. Or none that had lingered, to fret the edges of consciousness. Not surprising she thought, with a wry smile. Yesterdays series of events – with its assortment of different characters – had certainly not been a typical day for her. As it would be a few hours before Martha arrived she might as well get-up and make some coffee. She would shower and dress later.

Raising her head she propped up on an elbow to slowly look around the room. Dear Vinnie, how right she had been to insist she come down here. Already she felt distanced, in a time shift, and removed from her other life. Later she would call her again, tell her she was enjoying Lady House. Finally tossing off the covers Anne shivered a little in the cool air as she walked across the room to find her robe and slippers from the wardrobe. Then she had best close the windows to keep out the damp.

Hastily tying the sash of her dressing gown one of the ends seem to have flicked across the top of the bureau. The small pile of items she had removed from her handbag yesterday skidded onto the floor. With all the excitement over the dog, Milly, there hadn't been time to sort and put them away.

As Anne bent to gather up her passport, the train tickets, a business card, her diary. And there was a manila envelope. Slowly she stood up, placing everything else back onto the bureau. With a frown she balanced the envelope across her opened palm. Recognition clouded her happy mood. Damn. How stupid of her. Why on earth was she carrying *this* around? And why bring it down here?

Still frowning she continued to stare at the envelope in her hand. She should have already disposed of it; before she flew out from America. Certainly while she was in London. It just didn't belong with her here. Not in this house. It was an intrusion, a reminder of the past. And while it no longer carried much emotion for her, it was still a remembrance. Of the past, of failure. She had to rid herself of it right away. Today – no – this morning! With a sharp slap she put the envelope back on the bureau top, but well away from the other items, then strode across the room.

Closing the windows and pulling the curtains aside Anne studied the view. The garden with its shrubs and hydrangeas, the tall leafy trees, looked freshly green. Only a light rain was falling. It would soon be clearing-up. Beyond were fields, sectioned off by grey stone walls, in a casual yet orderly pattern. A vista that was timeless. The countryside excluded any view of the houses along the nearby. A calming retreat from the world's bustle and noise.

Though the view was soothing Anne's frown remained. She would dress right away then go down into St. Ives. A necessary chore before she could relax or think anything else. And she was prepared to walk the mile or so into town. First she must find the telephone number and address of her aunt's solicitor-friend, then pray he would be available. What day was it? Tuesday. He should be in his office – but if not she could leave the documents and instructions with his secretary.

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Martha stood near the sink puzzling over Anne's insistence she leave immediately.

'It's daft of ye to be walking, when I can drive you!'

A discreet sideways eye on the stiff envelope on the kitchen table, had suggested its purpose. Miss Stratton mentioned the situation of her niece with the husband. Still an all, why did she need to do it immediately? Another day or two couldn't hurt surely. And she'd just arrived; spent only the one night. But then – well, in this house, you could never tell could you. Neither what, nor when, nor why. Does seem a bit early though.

‘*No, Martha, you don't have to drive me! I happen to like walking.*’

Anne caught herself and turning met Martha's stoically impassive but hurt expression. She had been much too sharp. She grappled to find a reasonable excuse, then in a softer tone said,

‘Look, I don't want to tie-up your day, Martha. I don't know how long this will take. And . . . and it's been years since I was last in town – I could explore a bit after the rain lets-up.’

Martha sniffed as she shuffled some dishes around on the counter but seemed faintly mollified Anne believed.

‘Well. Your aunt's car's sitting in the garage. ‘Twon't be easy finding a place to park, but there's bound to be a spot behind his offices.’

Anne conjured up a smile as she looked at this dear and helpful soul. Before Martha could turn away again she said,

‘Of course! That’s a good idea, Martha. Aunt Vin said I could use the Mini and I’d forgotten.’

Before leaving Westport she even obtained her international driver’s license, knowing she’d be away a month or more. Vinnie would only drive while here; the reason her car was at Lady House. Some years ago she pronounced London impossible for parking or driving. And since there was a perfectly adequate transportation system, why bother with the car.

Martha gave a disdainful sniff. ‘O’course ye never know with these solicitor chaps, but seein’ as Mr. Stonegate is a good friend of Miss Stratton’s, he shouldn’t be taking-up too much of your time. Time ye’ have to pay for!’

Anne grinned. ‘I’m sure he won’t. But the faster I get there, the faster it’s done. Now . . . tell me how the pups are today – and Milly?’

‘Oh, they’s fine an’well, an’ so’s Millie. Come and see’em after their eyes open. Twon’t be long ‘fore they’re all over, chewin’up a storm.’

Anne pictured the warm squirmly black-and-white bundles from last night. ‘Do you think Millie will want to walk them over here?’
‘Lordy, I hope not! But with that dog you can never tell.’

Driving Vinnie's car was fairly simple, Anne discovered. Once she learned to leave the choke out until the engine was warm. It was just changing gears with her left hand, instead of her right, that was unusual. And remembering to stay to the left of the road required her concentration. Preoccupied with driving, and glimpses of the sea from the road, she was soon passing the railway station, surprised how swiftly she reached St. Ives. After negotiating the first curve into the upper town she immediately spotted the sign, Truscott & Stonegate, Solicitors. A small cobble-stoned area alongside the narrow storied building proved to be a parking place. Three cars were parked which left one space free for the Mini.

The middle-aged receptionist wore a friendly, politely curious expression.

'Mr. Stonegate is in. I'll ring his secretary, find out if he can see you.'

A moment later Anne heard footsteps descending the stairs and a smiling young woman came forward to greet her.

'Hello, Mrs. Martin. You're Miss Stratton's niece? Mr. Stonegate has to be in court soon, but he'll be happy to see you right now.'

'Thank you,' Anne said, 'I should have called after I arrived yesterday, I suppose, but - "

‘That’s all right. He has another forty-five minutes. My name’s Leslie Banks, by the way, if you should need to contact us again later.’

‘Pleased to meet you Leslie . . . and I’m Anne.’

As they both turned to go, Leslie said ‘We could take the lift – but it’s just one floor up?’

Anne shook her head following Leslie’s progress toward the stairs, noting the small version of an elevator beside the staircase.

After a brief tap Leslie opened a door and ushered Anne into a spare but bright and pleasant office. Angus Stonegate shot up from behind his desk with a broad smile. Tall and slim he appeared to be in his late thirties or early forties. With fair wavy hair he had the fresh coloring of someone who enjoyed the outdoors, Anne thought, rather than someone who spent a lot of time poring over legal tomes.

‘Hello! Happy to meet you, Mrs. Martin. Your aunt is one of my very favorite people. I’m delighted to meet her niece. Please, sit down and tell me how I may help you.’

As Anne seated herself across the desk from him, she reached into her shoulder bag for the envelope.

‘This is something I should have dealt with sooner. It’s all signed, ready to go, and . . . well now I’d like it done as soon as possible.’

Angus Stonegate reached his arm across the desk. ‘May I?’ After noting the engraving on the upper left of the envelope he slipped out the documents and absorbed the wording in a fast perusal of the three pages.

‘Well – seems fairly simple. Of course, I’ll want to read it again more thoroughly later. Just as long as you’re sure about . . . um, the terms.’ He looked up at her. ‘I mean, you won’t think you might change your mind? It seems as though your husband gets most of the benefits here.’

Anne sighed and shook her head. ‘No, I’m sure. Just the house is all I want. How long will it all take do you think?’

Angus rubbed his chin. ‘For that I’ll need to check-up on Connecticut divorce laws. Easy enough. But I can tell you, with any divorce once a filing is made – and both parties sign and accept, as here – it’s *de facto*, sort of. A done deal.’

Anne smiled. ‘Oh good.’

Looking down she began smoothing her skirt with her hands . . . then kept her eyes down as into her thoughts, in a dreamlike cadence, she heard

the voice of Beryl Penrose. ‘You should discard all the symbols of the past.’

She looked up with a start as Angus Stonegate asked her a question.

‘You’re wondering perhaps, er . . . when you’ll actually be free to, er . . . marry again?’

‘No! No, not at all. I . . . I just want to be sure it’s all final. Over.’

Angus grinned at her. ‘No worries, you’re almost there. I’ll make this my first project when I get back from court. It’s a typical sort of maritime case. Foreign boat, captain had some trouble with a crewmember in a local pub. Happens all the time. Shouldn’t take long.’

His breezily competent manner gave Anne a sense of confidence, despite the nagging feeling she should have handled it all sooner, with Vin’s London’s solicitors before arriving here. While he was speaking she had been carefully twisting her fingers.

‘Well then. I’ll call and let you know the exact filing.’ Angus said.

‘Oh,’ Anne said, ‘There is just one more thing.’ Anne said.

His face held a keen inquiry. ‘Yes?’

She reached over his desk to deposit the gold wedding band on top of the legal brief.

‘Could you send this back to his lawyers as well?’

looked at the ring then at her. ‘I could, I suppose.’ He paused. ‘Yes – why not? If you’re sure it’s what you want.? ’

Anne nodded, pleased he was so practical, not starchy and formal.

‘You must let me know how much it costs to retain you. I can leave a cheque with your secretary this morning if you like.’

‘Oh don’t worry about that yet. Won’t be much – we’ll work it out later.

‘Your aunt and I have a long-standing association. Very flexible.’

Anne stood up to leave and Angus Stonegate rose and came around the desk. Walking with her to the door he reached up to pluck a black court robe off the hook there.

‘Right then! I’ll be in touch. But . . . would you come and have Sunday lunch with the wife and I? This Sunday? She’d love to meet you and would be very interested to hear all about America. Our eldest son tells us he wants to go there after he finishes college.’

Anne laughed. ‘Well . . . ‘

‘Oh please say yes. Ursula Stratton is a regular at our house. We look forward to her each summer – she’ll be down soon, won’t she?’

‘Yes she will. Next month. And . . . well, as I’ve just got here I’ve no other plans, so – yes, I’ll be happy to.’

‘Good! I’ll have Phyllis call you later in the week.

After she returned to the Mini Anne sat for a few moments before starting the engine. The rain had stopped and the sky was a clear radiant blue. Where to now? She decided to drive through the town to Porthmeor Beach where the new Tate Gallery had been built.

After parking in the lot that overlooked the yellow sands and jade-green waters of the beach, Anne turned to admire the building. How clever of the Tate, she thought. An architectural delight. Modern yet non-intrusive, it seemed to only enhance the grey stone buildings around it. Local artists must be thrilled, she thought. Studying the details she now found it hard to remember the old gas storage tank of shiny steel that used to be there. Very attractive, she decided.

After gazing at the lovely curve of the beach once more, then slowly walking toward the entrance to the Tate, Anne stopped. She remembered

the invitation Martha had left propped against the vase of roses on the kitchen dresser. A special evening reception this Friday, with wine and hors d'oeuvres. Vinnie, who was a supporter of the gallery, had urged her to attend before she left London. Perhaps she would wait till Friday. Plenty of time to explore the collection by day. Weeks and weeks ahead of her.

She looked at her bare hands again. Her only other ring was a small opal which she hardly ever wore. It had been her engagement ring and now she was unlikely to ever wear it again. Trade it in, perhaps, or offer to it to her daughters-in-law. While carefully steering the car through the narrow streets she had noticed a jeweller's shop just before reaching the gallery. Its sign caught her attention: 'Celtic Reproductions.'

Maybe she would look. See if she could find something different in a gold ring – but nothing like a wedding band. In a carefree mood began to retrace her steps to the car, then decided to leave it where it was, and turned to walk back into the narrow streets.

The shop was narrow too, painted a glossy dark brown with gilt edging. Two small windows displayed several tiered velvet trays. The assortment looked fairly ordinary and nothing drew her interest. Anne pushed open the door and stepped into a brightly lit interior. On the counter

were additional lamps, she assumed to add more luster to customer's considered choices.

'Something Celtic you say.' The woman turned her head to the back of the shop where a man at a bench was working on something he held under a sort of microscope. 'George? Could you help the lady? She'd like to see some Celtic gold rings.'

The man looked-up. 'Be right with you, m'dear.'

When Anne had spread her hands along the counter while she looked at the showcase below, she realized the woman had noted the whitened state of her third finger.

'Didn't lose your wedding ring I hope? We've had several people that's happened to.' Her smile held genuine concern.

Anne paused for a moment, then with a wicked smile said, 'It was only the husband I lost. The ring I simply sent back.' She watched the woman's expression turn to embarrassment, and felt guilty.

'I'm newly divorced,' she quickly added.

For some strange reason this wasn't bothering her as much as it might have. The simple acknowledgement, in fact, to a stranger, of what was now *fait accompli*, had a rather satisfying effect. Like closing a door against a

draft. ‘Sorry luv – didn’t mean to be personal. Only wondered if you needed something copied. Reproduction is my husband’s specialty.’

Anne nodded. ‘That’s all right – now I’m looking for something different.’

Before the woman could respond, George was at the counter with a velvet-lined tray. ‘Let me take over now, Ellie,’ he quietly said.

With a shy glance he met Anne’s eyes. “We should probably determine your ring size first. I only have a few rings but I can always alter one – or make something.”

He picked up a disc with a cluster of metal circles on it then reached across the counter to lift Anne’s left hand. When she quickly withdrew it he looked startled. She held out her right hand towards him instead.

“Not that one. This finger, please.” It was a sudden unexplainable decision but she was strangely certain. While he alternately slipped two of the sizer rings over her finger for comparison, she glanced down at the tray he had earlier brought. Most seemed to be wider bands than her old one and each had either incised or overlaid patterning. After looking at the tray too the jeweler lifted one and held it under the lamp.

“This should fit,” he said, slipping it onto her finger.

Anne studied it, twisting it slowly around. A deeply scored repetitive decoration, curved and flowing, ran all around. It was a wide band and looked heavy, the design bold and definite.

“This is a Celtic pattern. But I also have some Victorian ring keepers. People often choose them as wedding bands today.”

When Anne didn’t respond but kept studying the ring George said, “The design is another variation of the classic Greek meander. Often called a Greek key pattern in England.

Anne looked up. “Greek? And Celtic too?” She thought his face looked honest, with the dark brown eyes reflecting the true artists belief in his craft.

“Oh yes. My parents are Greek – though I was born in London – so I know the classical origins. You’ll see it on some of the old Ogham stones, or carved on wooden pews in churches. In ancient times a particular design gained favor and travelled everywhere. It reached here by sea with the Phoenicians and Minoans, trading for tin.”

Anne studied the ring again. It was a lovely design, she decided. It looked attractive on her finger.

“And it is eighteen carat gold?”

George smiled, nodding. "I only work in fine metals. In the window are some of the commercial things that I have to carry."

Anne held her hand out, stretching the fingers wide under the lamp. "All right, I'll take it."

George looked pleased. "If you're not happy with it after you get home you can come back and choose something else. Are you on holiday here?"

After a moments consideration she replied, "I'll be here for a few months."

He nodded. "How about a box? No? You just want to . . . wear it?"

Anne nodded as she reached into her purse for her wallet. She was pleased to discover that the forty pounds cost was easily affordable, reflecting that the same item in America would have set her back far more.

After an exchange of good wishes Anne departed in a satisfied frame of mind. It was as well that she couldn't hear the exchange after she left.

"George, don't you think you should have mentioned – the right hand is where widows put their ring."

"No Ellie. And I didn't tell her the right hand is the Greek wedding finger."

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Anne steered the Mini slowly through the gap in the hedge. With a glance at her watch she saw it was past noon. Noting the grocery bags on the passenger seat beside her, purchases made during her walk back to the parking lot of the Tate, she smiled. The morning had proved a productive one in many ways. Not only had she finally divested herself of the divorce papers but the now useless symbol of marriage too. Anne glanced again at the new ring on her right hand as it lay across the steering wheel and a strange feeling of strength and satisfaction suffused her thoughts. It was another symbol, of course, but one of independence and new directions. Then the sudden image of Beryl Penrose swam into her thoughts. Odd how the memory of Beryl's cheerful confident manner yesterday on the train was now linked to her newfound feeling of content. Anne remembered she had her card and decided that she really might give her a call soon. Of all people, Beryl would certainly approve and understand. Along with Aunt Vinnie, of course.

As she neared the end of the trees that lined the driveway Anne braked and came to a halt. Turning off the ignition she looked down at Lady House. Martha would have left the house by now to return to the farm, so she was alone with the rest of the day to spend any way she wanted, in

unhurried ease and solitude. After she had stowed the car and unpacked the bags she would warm the Cornish pasty she had purchased and take it outside into the garden to eat.

The sun shone out of a blue and almost cloudless sky revealing the spare Georgian symmetry of the house in all its simple charm. The fact that it was located inland, away from the coast, added to its solitary grace. The gray stone boundary walls that enclosed the gardens lent an air of seclusion and privacy.

This was only her second day, Anne reflected, yet already there was a feeling of familiarity, of belonging. Her very own retreat. And for the moment, no one from her past life knew where she was, not even her sons. Still plenty of time to let them know. But later. This new found freedom she was experiencing was something she wanted to continue, to hug to herself for a while longer. Switching on the ignition key again Anne slowly proceeded down the driveway to Lady House.

CHAPTER FIVE

Isabelle Stratton replaced the receiver and stood motionless by the telephone for a moment. Her otherwise smooth, fine-boned face wore a small frown of concentration.

Each of the three calls she had received from Cornwall today contained subtle elements that caused her to ponder. First Martha, then Angus Stonegate, and now this last one, from Anne. But it was still Martha's that gave her the most reason to frown.

Certainly all of her intentions about sending Anne down to Lady House seemed to be working out nicely. It was only the risk of the unknowable future that gave her concern. With an imperceptible sigh she gathered up the card she had been reading and walked out of the room.

Miles Standish had purchased Lady House for her in 1936, three years before World War II. Three happy summers they had spent there, often with friends and house parties that lasted for days. It was still a much-loved legacy but a curious burden too. Ted's theories she had always discounted, about its strange attraction and effect on certain people. Her brother, the artist, possessed an artist's wildly creative soul. Yet she had slowly come to realize in the succeeding years after the war that something far beyond the ordinary accrued. While all old houses tend to collect their legends down the years, spirits, ghosts, what-have-you, none she had heard of incurred anything similar in effect to this one. Isabelle often wondered if its change of name, from Tremarra to Lady House, meant anything. Her practical nature told her, not at all. Ancient rumors, so easy to discredit as typical

country superstition, had filtered down through the years. And all of them carried a common thread, which were disturbingly similar to her own observations and experiences. It was the principal reason she had stopped renting it out, once her economic situation had stabilized, even prospered. One special positive attribute attained, however, it *was* protective to women. The reason why she had promptly sent Anne to stay there.

Having reached her desk in the now sunny back of the flat she glanced at the leather bound journal lying in a half-opened drawer and sighed.

“I shall have to tell her about all this sometime,” she murmured aloud, “And now I expect it will be sooner rather than later.”

Not just yet though. She wanted to delay that for a while. Let Anne enjoy her time there in peace. Heal the hurts and become strong again. In a few more weeks she would travel down to join her. Before Anne returned to Connecticut, which was three whole months away, perhaps she could try to explain to her about some of what had happened in the past.

Before leaving the room, Ursula went to stand before the photograph in its silver frame hanging on the wall near her desk. ‘Oh Miles, how could we ever have suspected how things would turn out.’ Touching two fingers

to her lips she blew a kiss at the formal serious-faced black-and-white image of the uniformed army officer.

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Wiping her hands with a paper napkin Anne stood up from the wooden bench and brushed a few pastry crumbs from her jeans then pulled at the waistband adjust it. The traditional Cornish pasty, a hearty meat-and-potato pie, had tasted delicious, if a bit too filling. Since she had last eaten one at least thirty years had elapsed, she marveled. And they were still good. After her scanty breakfast of cereal and these morning's activities she had been hungrier than usual. The fresh Atlantic air was having its effect. Even though Vinnie declared her too thin, she must not 'let herself go.' Reaching ones' fifties was quite enough, without becoming plump as well. When her jeans became too snug she would modify her diet, she vowed. 'That soup from the farm kitchen, or just a salad, will be quite enough for you tonight, my girl,' she murmured.

Before leaving the walled garden she glanced around her again in a comfortable appreciation. The apple trees were still in bloom and the orderly rows of vegetables looked vigorous, their varied greens and shapes now revealing their type; fronds of carrots, flat leaves that would be

cabbages, straight dark spikes of chard. A separate bed showed early lettuces.

The terrace at the front of the house with its wide views and the tables and chairs would have been the more logical place to eat she knew. The ideal place, in fine weather as today, to share lunch with a friend, or afternoon tea. Yet sheltered within these high granite walls she was comfortable, solitary and informal. The garden had an air of permanence and the past. She knew it might even predate the present house. Certainly a dwelling would have existed before this one, with the surrounding fields and its own wells. The Georgian style, like everything else developed upcountry, would reach Cornwall later than elsewhere. So this house might not have been built earlier than the 1800's, she thought. Whoever from the farm tended the garden she was glad they were not working on it today. It allowed her to enjoy a period of quiet time to herself.

Back in the kitchen, after rinsing off her plate and glass, Anne turned and crossed her arms around her waist, leaning back against the sink. Slowly surveying the room, that easily blended the old with the new, a grateful sense of ease crept over her. Security and comfort, and something else, a novel feeling of sureness within herself. With a rueful smile she recalled how she had resisted when Vinnie first urged her to leave and come

down early on her own. She resented being nudged away from the flat and London. Despite her aunt's description and positive outlook about how good it would for her the prospect of going to live in an unknown house, in a place she had almost forgotten, was not only hard, it was a bit scary. Now as she stood and looked about her in the kitchen she had to concede her aunt was infinitely wise, as always. Lady House was like a balm, holding her in its welcoming embrace as soon as she stepped through the front door. Could it only have been yesterday afternoon? It seemed already familiar to her, which was strange, since she had yet to fully explore it and spend long hours within it.

Spotting the pitcher of roses on the sideboard she saw that the invitation which had been propped against it had slipped. It lay flat on the surface now extending almost over the edge. She crossed the room to pick it up. The museum reception was for this Friday, at 6:30 pm, she confirmed, followed by a brief lecture, then a general viewing. Having seen the quite impressive new building this morning, she now knew where to park the car at least. Anne began to look forward to seeing the gallery inside – even though it would involve being among different people. In a rush of spontaneity she picked-up the telephone and dialed the RSVP number.

Moments later, after explaining she was Miss Stratton's niece, she was cordially welcomed to attend by the Tate's event assistant.

As well as pleasing her aunt, exploring the collections would make a happy diversion. Today was Tuesday, so in another three days she would be ready to socialize a little. Then on Sunday, she remembered, she had promised to join Angus Stonegate and his wife for lunch. Picking up the pad and pencil beside the telephone she made a note to herself to find a suitable house gift.

Anne smiled at how, on the train yesterday, she imagined herself leading an isolated and lonely existence until her aunt arrived. But with the sociable dinner at the farm last night, the wine-and-hors d'oeuvres reception at the Tate this Friday, then lunch with the Stonegates on Sunday, her life here in St. Ives was beginning to be livelier than what she had known in Westport. For the second time today the thought of Beryl Penrose popped into her mind. The first time had been when she had purchased the ring, for no accountable reason. Now she remembered placing the card with her telephone number on top of the bureau in her bedroom this morning. When Beryl had suggested meeting for lunch or tea sometime before leaving the train at Truro, Anne felt it was something she could easily forego, she was eager to be left to continue her journey. Today the prospect sounded . . .

amusing, even something she would enjoy. And she suddenly wanted to show her the house. Tomorrow she might give her a call, set something up for next week.

In a relaxed frame of mind Anne slowly walked out of the kitchen and along the hall towards the front door, undecided about whether she should go upstairs and properly organize her belongings into drawers or stay down here for a while. She passed the Morning Room across from the kitchen, where she could begin to write some cards, and a letter to her friend Stella back in Westport, who had promised to make a weekly check-up on her house there. Moving on she came to the Lounge at the front of the house. From the open doorway its comfortable chairs and shelves of books looked inviting. As she entered the faint scent of Lavender furniture polish was in the air. She began looking at the titles on one of the shelves that was at eye level. Running her fingers hand lightly along the rows of old hardbacks Anne reflected she still had barely started the paperback whodunit she had carried around in her purse since leaving Connecticut two weeks ago. Although reading was always a pleasure as well as an escape for her, the personal toll of the past few months seemed to have completely destroyed her concentration. A time when truth became stranger than fiction, she thought wryly, and certainly more compelling.

Her hand paused along a group of books on mid-level shelf. One seemed to be projecting out a little. Perhaps Martha's undoubtedly vigorous dusting had dislodged it. They were all novels by Dornford Yates. The author had been a long-ago favorite of her aunt, she remembered. These then must have been brought here from the London flat. Abstractedly she pulled out noting it was titled "Berry & Co." Lifting the cover and idly turning the preface pages a folded piece of paper fell out and dropped to the floor. As she bent to retrieve it she saw it was a fine quality stationary that was now yellowing faintly at the edges. Opening it she saw the blue ink was still clear and the handwriting firm.

Vin darling – my Lovely Lady of Lady House,

I managed to acquire this before its general release next week.

A club acquaintance of mine is with Macmillan publishers.

What a wonderful weekend we shared. I was glad your sister Annabelle and Brian Martin were able to join us for lunch. I am recommending him for assignment with the regiment. Exactly the sort of chap needed right now for some special projects.

Enjoy the few more days of well-earned rest. Will meet your train at Paddington on Thursday..

My love always, Miles

Anne stared at the note in her hand and experienced a strange jolt. This message from the past not only revealed a part of her aunt's life she had never known about before – it also spoke of Annabelle, her mother, and of Brian, her father. It was an added shock to realize they had once been right here in this house! And now she was here too. So many years later.

While she could still resurrect a few vague and separated incidents of her life with them before they died, and their photographs occupied a treasured and well-thumbed album, the knowledge that someone other than her aunt had known them, was writing about them, had a poignant impact. Of course others had known them too, Vin's brother, her Uncle Ted, as well as Desmond Phagan. But Miles Standish represented a complete stranger to her. Before being killed in the war, he had been the Chairman of Charme Cosmetics, for whom her aunt had worked as secretary and assistant.

Isabelle Vincula Stratton had always been an attractive woman, and still was, although it was only in later years that Anne had recognized this. After going to live with her, when she was eight, the one overriding factor had always been that they were closely related: she had been loved and cared for and cosseted by her own mother's older sister. Between Vin and Uncle

Ted, and also Uncle Phagen too, she had not lacked for familial identity and belonging.

Now Anne was forced to imagine how lovely a woman the young Vinnie had been in those early years. And that her employer, Miles Standish, had been in love with her. Had he survived the war, would they have been married? Would she have grown up with him as a father figure? Or with stepbrothers and stepsisters even? That her aunt had suitors through the years she was well aware but there had been no amorous attachments she was sure. Well fairly certain. Ursula Stratton had entertained, and was often accompanied to social events by various men, yet none became romantic associations, she was certain. When she was older Vin would often laughingly discount them to her. All had remained acquaintances, as distanced and formal as Uncle Des, who had mentored her with her school studies through the years. Desmond Phagen was a Cambridge don and a confirmed bachelor, and Vin's longtime friend and confidante. Between college terms he came to London, to occupy the back bedroom of the flat, while doing research at the British Library. He still did: two old friends of long standing who were comfortable with each other.

Miles . . . it could only be Miles Standish. Anne knew he had served in the war, had died in North Africa, but that was all she knew. Vin had

never talked about him. Among lots of framed photographs on the walls of the study there had one of Miles Standish. In officer's uniform he looked serious, handsome too she supposed. Vin had never talked about him to her, although she continued to work at Charme for many years while Anne was growing up.

Carefully replacing the note inside the book Anne slid it back onto the shelf. When Vinnie arrived she wanted now to question her about the past, about the old days before the war. It shouldn't be too hard to introduce the subject of Miles Standish, though she must be careful not to reveal her newly acquired knowledge of their relationship. After all these years Vinnie might want to volunteer some feelings about her own early life and loves?

With a small sigh, Anne turned and studied the pleasant room. It was strangely comforting to learn that her parents had once been here, even if only for a brief while. Most of the furnishings were newer, of course, but some things from the past remained, like the grandfather clock in the hall.

Was that why the house seemed welcoming, vaguely familiar to her? Did houses retain the spirit of past occupants? With a little shake of her shoulders she smiled at her fanciful idea. Yet the reality was, she did feel snug and secure within its walls, and had done since she first arrived yesterday.

With a final glance around the room she walked to the door, crossed the hallway and slowly climbed the stairs, now brightened with sunlight from the landing window as it had been at this time yesterday when she arrived. She would go and properly unpack her clothing, sort things onto hangers and into drawers. In other words – make herself at home. The idea was appealing.

As she passed the door to her aunt's bedroom, across from her own, she stopped. While quickly glancing inside it yesterday she had noted that one wall had been devoted to a whole array of framed pictures. And the urge to explore was strong.

Vinnie's bedroom had been decorated in bold shades of deep blues, and coral, with touches of rich burgundy, which went well with the dark toned woods of the furniture. The walls were painted an immaculate bluish white which made the room's strong colors seem stronger still.

The photographs, which occupied one whole wall, the opposite side to the front windows, and catching the light from them across the room, were mounted in various colored frames, some in light or dark or painted white wood, some in bright silver metal. The total effect was attractive – and arresting – and typical of her aunt's eclectic but always effective sense of style.

Anne slowly studied them beginning at the top down to the bottom then moving along to repeat the process. There didn't seem to be any particular order at first. She found one of herself with Alan, and Paul and Stephen when they were young boys, in their first home in New Jersey. She remembered this was taken by Vinnie on one of her visits to America. It was in the same grouping as more obviously later ones: Vinnie with Uncle Desmond and other people she didn't recognize, at some gala affair; another of Vinnie in an attractive hat and that had to be at The Chelsea Flower Show.

It was in the last column of groupings she found some older photographs. These were nearer to the head of the bed, which was in the center of the room. There was one of Miles Standish, a duplicate of the one that was in her aunt's office in London. It was a large group photograph that held her glance. Anne carefully counted seven young people; three women, four men. All were dressed in attire that was stylish in the late 'thirties. All were laughing, as they sat or stood . . . on the front terrace of Lady House.

She was arrested and intrigued by the palpable mood of carefree happiness that it projected. All the faces reflected a youthful surety and purpose, in the sunlight of a perfect summer afternoon. In the background stood a drinks table stood in the background and some held glasses in their

hands. Flowers were blooming along the borders of the lawn and in the stone urns of the terrace wall. Two croquet mallets were propped up on the terrace steps, and over the balustrade a light shoulder wrap had been carelessly flung.

Anne stood transfixed and carefully absorbed every detail. All but two of the group she recognized. There was Vincula Stratton, attractive as always with slim legs elegantly crossed, gesturing with her hand towards whoever was taking the picture. Behind her, with both hands on the back of her chair stood a darkly handsome Miles Standish, in an open neck shirt that sported a silk ascot. A broadly smiling Desmond Phagen, wearing the striped summer blazer of his college, aping for the camera with a croquet mallet in one hand, a drink in the other. A vivacious girl with a loose wave of hair over one eye had her arms playfully draped around the neck of a stolid young man who though smiling appeared mildly embarrassed.

Edward Stratton, her Uncle Ted, sat sideways on the terrace wall, glass in his left hand, pencil in the right and a sketch pad on top of the wall in front of him.

It was the final attractive couple in the picture that Anne's eyes eagerly absorbed, Annabelle Stratton and Brian Martin – the parents whom she could barely remember. This was a photograph she had not seen before.

Although Aunt Vin had given her many photographs, along with a leather album, including all she had of Annabelle as a child, Anne wondered why this one had been omitted.

Each of them were smiling as they stood, arms around each others waist with heads slightly inclined together, gazing out over the lawn. While obviously a part of the group they formed a separate unit unto themselves too. Were they just engaged then, or had they already married, she wondered? There was no indication of exactly when the photograph was taken. She guessed that it had to be prewar, everyone looked so carefree and happy. Not until she had the opportunity to ask Vinnie would she know.

After a while Anne let her eyes stray to other photographs around it, and searched for others that might also include her parents. Many seemed to be of the same period, judging by the style of clothing. Some were just of the house and the gardens, not noticeably changed from how it looked today, but no others portrayed Annabelle and Brian in this setting.

Turning away at last she slowly walked across the room to the window, deep in thought. After a brief glance at the gardens below she turned and studied the entire room again, as well as the wall covered by framed photos. All of the furnishings in the room, along with the colorful decor had been artlessly assembled with Vinnie's customary touch of

elegance and good taste. And the wall of photographs too had been quite carefully selected. There were so many others she might have chosen to include. But just the people and the places and the events that were most important and dear to her had been featured.

With a new appreciation Anne realized it also constituted a sort of tally, a visual survey and record of Isabelle Vincula Stratton's entire life. These were the last things within her view before she slept each night, the first she woke to each morning. Anne saw that she had been in error to think the recent summers her aunt spent here were merely a casual holiday break-from-the-city. For Vinnie, Lady House was a strong link with the past. It had always been a very important part of her life, not merely another way to supplement her income, as she had once claimed, when a more youthful Anne had once asked, many years ago, why she bothered.

Was this why Vinnie had recently stated, that along with the London flat, Lady House too would be part of her inheritance? The reason her own room here had been just as carefully furnished? And also, why she had cajoled and insisted that she come to stay here now, before Vinnie herself arrived, when she felt she had no ties to the house? And suddenly she discovered that she did. Her parents had stayed here once – surely just briefly – but now she too was linked to its past. There was no avoiding the

fact that from the moment she arrived she had felt wonderfully 'at home' and comfortable. Can houses really retain an aura of the past within their walls, a faint spirit of the people who had lived and laughed there?

With a bemused shake of her head Anne ambled slowly towards the door of the bedroom. What a surprising discovery, and how she wished that Vinnie would arrive soon for she had so much she wanted to learn now. But she would wait until she did arrive in person. There was no way a telephone conversation could satisfy all of her needs to know.

Once back in her own bedroom Ann finally finished unpacking her suitcase, carefully folding the lingerie, sweats and knit tops into drawers in the bureau, and putting the rest onto hangers in the armoire. Noting the few items of clothing she had brought, mostly matching and interchangeable, she mentally noted what she could wear to the evening reception on Friday, and what to the luncheon on Sunday. She was pleased this was a relaxed and casual part of the world; her blue jeans with blouses, sweaters and jacket would be the backbone of her wardrobe while she was here. Yet if her social life continued at this rate, or even expanded – heaven forbear, that ubiquitous little black dress with the beige suit jacket, or her beige raincoat over it, were going to be well-used! Oh well, she could always buy a few more silk scarves, she supposed, for variety.

After stowing the empty suitcase on a vacant top shelf Anne turned and crossed to the bureau to see that all was tidy on top. Just Beryl's card remained. This she carefully placed in the center: now eager to call strange but affable woman on the train. Glancing in the mirror above the bureau she ran a hand through her hair and studied her image. The severe cut she had acquired before leaving for London was already beginning to grow out. As she fingered the ends the decision came to let it grow out now. It would make life easier than to keep running to a hairdresser for a trim every few weeks.

Vinnie had also been right that a little brightening wouldn't be amiss. She had noticed this morning where the chemist chain of Boots was located in town, and resolved to buy a rinse when next she was in St. Ives. Before Friday she might even experiment with styling it, make it softer on top and emphasize her natural wave, curve the ends under. The realization dawned that she didn't need to look so spare and efficient, so drab anymore. She wanted to look as vibrant and alive as . . . as the salt sea air around her, and as soft and attractive as the new furnishings in her room.

With a jaunty toss of her head she smiled and walked to the window to look out over the front gardens of Lady House again, slumbering in the afternoon sun. In this different place, the land of her heritage, that was so

far away from her immediate past, she could afford to become a different person.

CHAPTER SIX

Entering the gallery Anne looked up again to admire the soaring “St.Ives” window by Peter Ponder. She had given it a cursory glance before when impulse led her off to visit the jewelry shop. Now as she studied the blue sky, gold sands, and white spread-winged seagulls, she unconsciously twisted the ring around her finger.

Though early evening now it still remained light enough outside for the window’s colors to glow. At a more northerly latitude than Connecticut, Anne remembered that here in Cornwall, long late summer nights lay ahead and it would stay light until nine-thirty or ten.

The large main floor of the gallery was filled with color, movement and conversation, underscored by an occasional burst of laughter. Accepting a glass of wine from a server, responding to smiles and casual greetings from people passing, she felt a nudge of pleasure, satisfied by her decision to

venture out this evening. What had first loomed as a decisive effort on her part, now seemed an easy, and certainly pleasant – undertaking. Almost as soon as she entered she knew it would be a convivial yet undemanding event. Several people had paused to make casual conversation, others to give her an amiable smile as they passed.

The new Tate's patrons exuded a quite different attitude compared to those of London's older, more sophisticated galleries. And it was a decidedly Cornish attitude: relaxed enthusiasm combined with comfortable command. No feigned posturing, aloof disdain, nor air of quasi-boredom. It was *their new gallery*, in *their* St. Ives, thank you kindly – and such a delight too.

An inward smile nudged her reveries. Was it possible Vinnie's prediction would be borne out? Had she started to enjoy this return to a once familiar locale, so soon? This unique land that held so many early, happier memories for her, first as a child, then as a young woman, before her marriage some twenty-odd years ago. This ancestral country from which her forebears had sprung.

As Anne sipped her wine she directed her gaze toward the far paintings. The proper purpose for being here, she reminded herself. All the many canvases she intended to study close-up quite soon. Framed and

unframed art hung around the walls and up the curving staircase to the galleries above, forming irregularly shaped splashes of color; some muted, some bold. Were she asked to define a first impression of the new Tate, she thought ‘modern’ best served, both for its architecture and its content. In fact, the Duchy of Cornwall’s ‘art scene’ was so up-to-date it might even be trend-setting.

Discreetly studying the people around her now Anne observed that this sizeable a crowd of people must mean a flourishing membership already, the new Tate Gallery was a success. Whether in pairs or small groupings she noted that women slightly outnumbered men. A familiar statistic, she was aware, especially with older segments of any population, anywhere. Widows tend to outnumber widowers. And don’t forget about divorcees either, she quickly reminded herself. Then with surprise realized she had made it a point of humour, not anguish. You’ve stopped being a martyr, my girl!

Her slim charcoal brown dress, neckline draped with a beige-and-green silk Tree-of-Life Liberty scarf purloined from Vinnie’s drawer, and topped by her beige suit jacket, had been a wise choice. *Je suis bien de mon peu*, she thought; and did indeed feel comfortable with herself. Many of the dresses around her were floral prints, either subtle or bold, a fashion staple

all over the country. Due either to the British predilection for flower gardens, she theorized, or to an often sunless temperate climate. Younger guests, both women and men, sported the ubiquitous blue jeans, of course. But neat and stylish ones, topped by fashionable blouses, shirts, and blazers.

Since the sea air had certainly begun to encourage her appetite, Anne decided to fortify her stomach before tackling higher aesthetics. In the act of stepping towards the buffet tables against the far wall, she was halted in mid-stride by a voice close behind her right shoulder.

‘Hello! I’d hoped your aunt would be here tonight too. Are you enjoying the collection?’

Turning to respond she tilted her head up to identify the tall figure with the easy smile. It took several seconds for recognition to occur – the man beside the hedge, who had surprised her on the afternoon she first arrived.

Even without the shabby hat, and discounting the accent, once familiar from another place and time, he still stood out as ‘different’ from all the other men in the room. He . . . simply didn’t *look* English, although neatly dressed tonight, in tailored slacks, jacket, and a turtleneck shirt.

‘Trust I didn’t startle you -- *again*,’ he continued, still smiling.

‘Oh! Oh no. Sorry, I was a bit . . . tired and distracted then.’ Recall of that first encounter brought an embarrassed memory of her strident turn-down of his offer of help. Only last Tuesday, wasn’t it?

‘So I was later told.’ The smile lit his eyes. “A long train ride, then Millybegs depositing her pups on you. How’re they doing, incidentally?”

Anne quickly remembered the dark suspicions she had voiced to Peter Laity. Oh, please, surely clan loyalty had prevented Laity from passing those along to him, even for a sly chuckle. An extra effort was needed now she thought.

Assuming what she hoped was an equally pleasant smile, she said, ‘They’re doing just fine. All seven of them. I’ll be visiting again tomorrow.’

While each of them took a sip of wine from their glasses, they quietly studied each other. Anne noticed the soft brown colour of his eyes and the sandy hair brushed back from a broad intelligent brow.

‘Any idea when your aunt will be arriving?’
‘Well, her last estimate was about three weeks. But I’ll believe it when I see her – she’s always so busy in London.’

‘Good. I’m looking forward to that,’ he replied.

Curious about his interest, she quickly added, ‘You know my aunt then?’

‘No, but I almost feel I do . . . though we’ve only spoken on the phone.’

Several people pressed close as they attempted to pass, causing them each to step aside. Anne was glad of the brief interruption to marshal her thoughts. As they rejoined she saw his smile broaden.

‘You see, I’m her new tenant.’

Observing the puzzled look that appeared on Anne’s face he started to explain.

‘I decided to stay on a bit longer here in Cornwall, so on the Laity’s recommendation, she kindly offered to lease me her cottage down by the harbor for a few months.’

Astonished, Anne blurted, ‘But – that’s Uncle Ted’s cottage! I mean – I didn’t know she still . . .’ Confusion made her pause, then quickly add, ‘The Laity’s told me you’re an artist. And that you stayed at their farm.’

‘That’s right. I need a bit more space now that I’m painting rather than just sketching. They’re a fine family, the Laity’s, but an artist’s clutter and odd hours of working would be too much to impose on them.’

Busily digesting these new facts, Anne merely nodded, and continued to study him as she again sipped her wine. Looks could be deceiving but he seemed to be somewhere in his fifties. She wondered whether the name, so casually imparted, was one she ought to have known. Then decided Aunt Vinnie could fill her in – about lots of things!

‘So, this must be your first view of the new Tate. It’s a really well-designed building. Great addition for the St. Ives art community.’

Anne smiled. ‘Yes – and yes. But tell me, how did you happen to visit Cornwall?’

‘I was working abroad, in Greece, for several months – and simply decided to detour here, before heading back to the States.’

Before she had an opportunity to respond Anne saw an elderly matriarch in silk and pearls bearing down on them.

‘Michael! My dear boy, you must come and meet a friend of mine, Hector Lane, and try to explain the significance of that large painting over there. He’s taken an irrational dislike to it, declaring it’s really not art!’

With a loud chortle of mirth, she proceeded to grasp Anne’s free hand and give it a friendly squeeze.

‘Come along too, my dear, and I’m so sorry to interrupt your conversation.’

Anne smiled back, 'No, that's quite all right. Anyway, I plan to sample the hors d'oeuvres over there before looking around.'

Michael bent his head toward her and whispered, 'Mrs. Ethel Cartwright. She's my escort tonight.' Then he suddenly held out his hand, 'Oh! Sorry again! I quite forgot to introduce myself – Michael Tollander.' Lightly shaking the extended hand, she said, 'Anne Martin-Fellowes, Mr. Tollander.'

Anne watched as the two figures thread their way back across the gallery. She rather admired the air of casual self-confidence he wore, amused at how soon he appeared to have entrenched himself within the community: first with the Laity's, then with her aunt, and now with the majestic Mrs. Cartwright.

Yet she knew Cornwall has always indulged the artists in its midst. Over the years there had been many. A love for creative expression, for all of the arts, is an inbred trait of the Celts.

Continuing toward the tables of food Anne had to admit Mr. Michael Tollander, visiting artist, seemed a quite respectable individual after all. Rather nice-looking too, now he was decently attired and in a social setting. During their brief first encounter she hadn't noticed his warm brown eyes, or smooth lightly tanned complexion. And minus that battered poacher's hat

she saw that his sandy brown hair was neatly trimmed, brushed back off a broad forehead. She suddenly realized she had forgotten to ask where in the States he was from and wondered if they would run into each other again. But if he had rented the cottage for several months it was possible.

As she glanced down at the table and reached for a plate her reverie was halted when she became conscious two people had moved close beside her.

‘Makes a nice change from the old gas works, doesn’t it?’

Turning she stammered in surprise. ‘Beryl . . . Beryl Penrose! But . . . just this afternoon I looked at your card on my bureau – and thought about calling you next week.’

‘Well, I’m happy to hear that.’ Beryl said. ‘And this is my sister Carol, whom I told you about.’

After the two women exchanged smiles and greetings, Beryl looked her up and down and said, ‘You’re looking better. And I like your hair that way. Maybe you should let it grow longer again now.’

Momentary baffled, Anne quickly remembered and thought Beryl’s psychic intuition could probably take in the past as well as the future. ‘Perhaps next week you’d like to come and take a look at the house where I’m staying?’

‘All right. But let’s have lunch in town first. Then we can talk. A little preparation before I see that . . . special house. Just give me a call.’

The two women started to move away in the opposite direction. Anne looked down at her plate, then started to advance along the table.

Beryl turned again and moved closer, ‘Oh – that man? He’s going to prove a good friend to you.’ With a mischievous smile she walked away.

Although the rest of the evening was a pleasant diversion, Anne managed to view only a small portion of the Tate’s contents before deciding to leave for home. She didn’t have an opportunity to meet or speak to Tollander again but later, across the width of the first floor gallery, he had glanced her way and raised his hand in a casual wave, accompanied by a warm smile.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

English Sunday Lunch was still a time-honored tradition, Anne remembered, a robust meal of several courses. That would mean she needed only a light supper this evening. Since Martha had brought over some ham, cheese, and fresh bread from the farm, she was well set-up. Several lettuces in the walled garden outside were ready to cull, and there were a few tomatoes in the refrigerator.

The days when six-day working weeks had been the norm Sundays constituted a precious ‘free day,’ a time to relax or to socialize with family and friends. That time had passed by the time her aunt worked at Charme but she kept the Sunday Lunch tradition. As did the rest of the country. When Anne was in her teens Aunt Vin always invited school friends to

join them, with her own older guests, for discussion and reminiscence and always laughter around the table.

Anne grinned, wondering if anyone still served 'Bubble and Squeak' for Monday night's dinner, the leftovers from a big Sunday roast. She had tried it out once on Adam and Paul when they were young. But her thoroughly American sons were not at all intrigued by this thrifty English working-class dish, meeting it with cries of, 'Y-u-u-ck – it's just leftovers, all chopped up and fried together!'

Although Angus's wife had specified casual attire Anne thought blue jeans might not be appropriate, however neat, nice and new they might be. A glance at her limited collection of attire, indicated the beige gabardine pants, and perhaps a loose matching sweater. She briefly considered Aunt Vin's Liberty scarf she had purloined for the Tate, then rejected it for a multi-colored bead necklace she had brought with her. While the day was sunny she knew it could turn cool later, so she slung the matching beige jacket over her arm for insurance.

Downstairs she gathered up the tissue-wrapped box of Lavender soap from the kitchen table and a bottle of white wine she had bought for a house gift. With a quick glance around to see that all was tidy and in order, she removed the car keys from the hook near the basement door. As she did she

paused, briefly tracing the outline of the large old key hanging there with her finger. Someday soon, she knew, her curiosity would prompt her to explore that basement, in spite of Martha's discouragement and warning about the steps and cobwebs. Now comfortably settled-in at Lady House she wanted to learn all its features, quirks, and its hidden places too, as well as something of its history.

This house she had been so reluctant to come to had lent her a needed sense of identity again, she reflected, as she walked along the hallway toward the front door. Standing for a moment on the porch after closing the door she gazed out over the grounds with a sense of tranquility, then proceeded to the right and the rear of the house with a light step.

Anne swung the double doors of the garage outwards and got into the car, stowing the two gifts on the passenger seat with her purse. Today she even had a modicum of confidence about her driving ability after her two previous excursions. Changing gears with her left hand wasn't really so much of an effort now.

As she slowly negotiated the lane leading to the highway, Anne felt grateful that after so many weeks of doubt and dislocation she was regaining charge of her life once more. From months of feeling downcast, angry at being tossed onto a slagheap of outdated, unwanted women, she had started

to enjoy new people and different experiences again. Though Cornwall was remote from the rest of the world it represented a safe haven, and it was the land of her origins. St.Ives especially held only happy memories for her, of holidays spent with Aunt Vinnie and Uncle Ted. Now that she was sufficiently distanced from her immediate past, her old familiar life, she found she could even tolerate an occasional glance back . . . without any desire now to return.

As she had been assured, the Stonegate's house was easily reached within twenty minutes. Located midway along a winding road it was a modern two-story house yet built in a traditional style. With broad terracing it presented a charming façade of brick and stone. Other houses along the road, spaced well apart, had similarly lush and well-maintained gardens. Set far enough inland from the coast, the plants and trees had flourished without the scour of wind off the Atlantic. Such an abundant botanical display also indicated a solid financial status. This was borne out by the additions of gazebos, fountains, fishponds and barbecue terraces. At one locale she had even noted a whimsical folly.

When she drove into the driveway Angus hailed her from the open front door, "You're right on time – come on in!" He walked down the

pathway to open the car door and assist her out, continuing, “All you need to do now is name your poison – and then relax.”

He led her into a large, sunny, comfortably furnished living-room and took her jacket away to hang-up, as his wife Nancy swept in wearing an apron over a smart red silk pantsuit.

“Oh good,” she said, “I’m so happy you were able to join us, Anne. You’ll have time to enjoy a drink before lunch. And before Michael Tollander arrives. Jonathon was late getting back but he’s upstairs changing now.”

Angus, returning, said. “What’ll it be? Gin and Tonic, Scotch and Soda, red or white wine, or something else? We’ll be opening a bottle of Champagne soon, when the others arrive.”

“You could open it now, Angus,” Nancy directed, “If Anne prefers.”

Anne laughed, “Just a glass of white wine for the moment, please.” She was still adjusting to the news that someone so recently met was going to be present today. “Is . . . is Michael Tollander the American artist? I met him, briefly, the other evening, at the Tate.” No way would she comment on their first encounter outside the walls of Lady House.

“Yes indeed.” Replied Angus. “That’s him – and he can help out with Jonathon’s queries about life in the United States. But I’ve instructed our son to save all his questions until *after* the main course.”

Conflicting moods assailed Anne. Pleased she wouldn't be the sole focus of attention today, nor bear the entire burden of explaining another country to them; she was also suddenly shy about meeting Tollander again, so soon. Before she'd had a chance to question her aunt about him. Though it was obvious Aunt VIN had decided he was solid enough, since she had allowed him become her tenant.

As she sipped her wine the sound of another car could be heard entering the driveway. Angus left to greet their guest and Nancy returned to the kitchen with a breezy, "Be right back." Anne took the opportunity to look around her, admiring the sleek but plump gray leather couches with their maroon silk cushions that bore delicate silver tracings all over. The carpet was a deep shade of blue, a color that was echoed in the patterned draperies at the windows. Painted walls in a soft gray-is blue lent the room an aura of stylish serenity.

The two men entered, laughing. Michael laid a large brown wrapper he had been carrying on the coffee table, and came forward to Anne with hand extended to shake her own. "I'm so delighted to see you again," he said with a broad smile that was echoed in his eyes. "Now we'll have a chance to get to know each other better. The Tate was fun – but a bit noisy!"

Anne inclined her head with a small smile. Not really sure she wanted to ‘get to know’ him any better just yet; but she appreciated his gentle manners and tact. Today he was wearing smart navy gabardine slacks, with a navy cashmere sweater over a light blue cotton shirt. He certainly didn’t appear the wild bohemian she envisioned when he was lurking around the walls of Lady House, at their first encounter. And since he could afford cashmere sweaters, not exactly a ‘penniless artist’ either.

The abrupt appearance in the doorway of another tall, handsome man saved her from having to respond to his comment. This one was much younger, obviously Jonathon. Nancy too entered just then through the other doorway, minus her apron.

After the introductions had all been made, Nancy handed Angus a tea towel and instructed him to open the Champagne, “But try not to let the cork fly, dear!” adding, “He’s hit a few things sometimes. Everything’s ready but we’ve ample time for a glass before sitting down.” She reached out her hand to remove Anne’s wine glass, “Don’t bother finishing that, there’s more with lunch.”

When everyone held a filled glass, Jonathon too, Angus pronounced, “To new friends, sunny days – and good sailing.” They all murmured assent before tasting the sparkling brew in their glasses.

“Oh! I didn’t want to forget,” Michael reached down for the package and handed it to Jonathon. “Though I think you’re Mother might want this.”

Jonathon put down glass and carefully extracted a sketch in colored pastels, “Hey, this is good. How – when did you do it?”

“While sketching down at the marina this morning, I saw a boat called La Donna Lax so I guessed it had to be Angus’ son bringing it in. Your father mentioned its name to me earlier.”

Jonathon laughed, “You even caught the exact way the wind was heeling then. I had a job bringing the helm around. You must be pretty fast.”

Michael smiled, “I usually work in charcoal first, to swiftly get the whole image, then I can add shading and pastel touches later if I choose.”

Everyone then got a chance to hold and admire the sketch. Angus smiled and passed it to Nancy, who exclaimed, “Oh Michael. You’re so right – I love it! And I shall have it framed to hang in my sitting room upstairs.”

When Anne’s turn came she saw it was a lovely vibrant scene of wind and water and the unmistakably accurate features of a keen Jonathon at the helm of a sailboat. She asked, “Do you ever repeat some of your sketches later, in oils or watercolors? My Uncle Ted sometimes did that.”

Michael nodded, “I know, I’ve seen some of his work. He had a unique talent for sky and water. And yes . . . both sketches and photographs

can lend themselves to a major work in oil or gouache. But watercolors I tend to do from scratch. Not all artists work in the same way, of course."

Anne felt a twinge of pleasure at his comment about her uncle, like an affirmation of herself too. This man who had so startled her to anger when she first glimpsed him was really a charming person.

Their Sunday lunch was indeed hearty. And much more modern from her antiquated memories. Fresh crab cocktail with thinly sliced brown bread, delicately sliced kiwi and melon, followed by stuffed crown pork roast and an array of deliciously fresh vegetables. The desserts were sublime: apple pie with custard sauce, homemade ice cream with raspberries, then almond meringues dipped in chocolate to go with the coffee.

The conversation had veered from general observations on current affairs, to personal reflections, and included nuggets of information that Anne would remember and think about later. She learned that Michael lived in Newport, Rhode Island, in an old house that had belonged to his parents, that he was long divorced and had a grown-up daughter. He fielded many of Jonathon's questions about college in America, suggesting two schools he

might enjoy and apply to. He then deferred to Anne for her opinion. She found she was quite comfortable in discussing the education of her own two sons, contributing some of their comments about the pro's and cons of the two different universities they had attended.

Jonathon pronounced that his intentions of taking some schooling in America were more to imbibe the cultural differences as well the subject matter. He was a dedicated Cornishman and planned to practice geology at home if he could, with the local mining industry if he was lucky. Anne noticed that Nancy's face reflected a serene gratitude at this observation. After thanking both Michael and Anne he asked his mother if he could be excused now. He'd promised to go hiking with some friends this afternoon.

Angus suggested the four of them take coffee out on the back terrace. The sunshine prevailed and the afternoon was calm and not windy. Comfortable patio chairs overlooked an expanse of tidy garden with flower beds and shrubs. When Nancy and Angus disappeared to the kitchen to collect the cups and coffee pot, Michael turned to Anne, "How are you enjoying Lady House?"

"Very much. It's my first visit there actually and on my way down to Cornwall I wasn't sure how I would feel about it. But now . . . I feel as

though it's my second home." She laughed. "It has only been a week and I thought I'd be ready to return to London by now but already I feel settled."

The Stonegate's returned then carrying two trays. Along with the coffee was a plate of chocolate dipped meringues. Michael groaned, "How do you Brits keep from putting on weight?"

"Cold weather, my lad, and lots of walking! Anyway, it's just the once a week splurge," Nancy replied.

The conversation turned to local affairs in St. Ives. And at Michael's prompting, some of the history of the area. The old mining history was touched upon along with the fishing fleets once employed. But it was a casual remark by Nancy, about Lady House, and the strange reputation it had acquired over the years, that Anne's attention was caught and held.

'I didn't know about any reputation.' She said, 'My aunt has owned it a long time, that much I know, and she's only recently started to live there during the summer.'

Nancy grimaced. 'Oh, I shouldn't have said anything. She is the one who can better fill you in on the background. But . . . well Lady House is still thought of as both myth and mystery to the locals."

Angus coughed and interjected, 'Nancy has a feminine streak of romanticism, I fear, Anne. Any old mansion, a little bit isolated, tends to

gather its legends and superstitions, especially in the Celtic soul of Cornwall!'

Anne was avidly curious now. 'But what exactly?' She half-smiled, 'Hey, I'm living there right now. I deserve to know.'

Michael Tollander reached across and patted her arm. 'Don't worry about it, Anne. I've only heard a little but one thing was made clear – it's very protective of women. Hence its name.'

Anne considered this for a moment then said. 'Its name? I thought that was either a corruption of Laity, a common Cornish name, like the family farm nearby, or else it was once a sort of Dower house.'

Nancy quickly interposed. 'You're right on that score. It really was a Dower house when it was first built . . . oh, late seventies, early eighteen-hundreds I think. At least, that's the general conception. But you know how history becomes distorted.'

'Well . . . why was there superstition? What happened there?' Anne persisted.

Angus stood up, giving his wife a meaningful look. 'Let's not get involved in idle speculation and quasi-history. What I want to know is: who wants to go sailing next weekend? The weather outlook is looking good.'

Nancy quickly took-up the intended diversion of her husband. ‘Yes! Do you sail, Anne? We already know that you do, Michael.’

Anne knew that any more questions about Lady House would have to wait.

‘Yes, I did sail in Connecticut.’ Then, hesitantly, ‘But I’ve never sailed in local waters.’

Angus laughed. ‘No problem. Just so long as you know jib from mainsail and how to pick-up a bouy.’ At Anne’s worried expression, he added: ‘I’m teasing. Michael and I will do all the hard stuff. How about a run out to the Scilly Isles – if the weather predictions hold?’

Michael smiled, ‘Sounds great. I’ll bring a sketchbook along. I’ve read about those islands. Part of the lost lands of Lyonesse? And ancient fougous that might be of Greek origin. I’d much sail there than go by tourist helicopter.’

Angus laughed. ‘Then that’s it! What about leaving early Saturday morning? Keep your calendars free. I’ll be in touch at the end of the week about details and time.’

Anne realized it was time to leave. She got up. ‘Nancy and Angus, that was a wonderful lunch. I feel I won’t be eating again for a week!’

Michael had risen too. ‘Perhaps Anne and I should put some picnic food together for next week’s sail.’ He looked at her as he said this, eyebrows raised in query. ‘The least we can do after this fabulous feast.’

Nancy and Angus, now standing, made demurrs. Angus said, ‘If it makes you happy, by all means. Keep it simple though. I’m a big cheese eater myself. Pack stuff you like. Remember the ocean air gives you an appetite. And we can always duck in to a hostelry after we reach St. Mary’s.’

In the driveway, as Michael and Anne walked towards their cars, Nancy called, ‘Anne? When you speak to Vinnie, ask her when she is coming down, will you? And give her my best.’ Anne nodded and said, ‘I will.’

Michael came over and opened the door of Anne’s car. ‘Come and have lunch one day in town. We can decide on the food. Give me a call when you’re free.’

As Anne stepped into her seat she looked up at him. ‘Alright. I’ll do that.’ Her sudden feeling of shyness surprised her. It all sounded like an old-fashioned date. The thought of seeing him alone was . . . pleasant, yet it held hidden complexities. What else would they talk about? Michael smiled at her, as if sensing her ambivalence. ‘You’re welcome to inspect your

uncle's cottage too, you know! And you can even critique some of my work.' At this she had to laugh. 'My aunt is a better judge and critic than I'll ever be. But thanks.' She slowly drove away out of the driveway, with a final wave to Nancy and Angus, still smiling.

CHAPTER EIGHT

As soon as they had chosen from the lunch menu, a Lemon Sole for Beryl and Skate for herself – with fresh crab cocktails to begin – Anne wanted to discover why Beryl had insisted they eat out, rather than at the house she would soon visit. Especially after she had enthusiastically described the fresh produce from the nearby farm, and how Martha would be flattered to be asked to prepare something too.

Beryl half tilted her head to one side before picking up one of the glasses of Sauvignon that had just arrived at their table. She took a sip then stated.

‘It’s quite simple really. I like my first sensory perceptions to be clear, unclouded. Eating is a sensory experience, at least for me.’

‘Ah,’ said Anne. ‘I hadn’t thought about it that way.’

Beryl smiled. ‘Few people do. The obese, and the school of chomp-it-all-down-fast-and-grab-more, certainly don’t! Anyway – I wanted you to know about this restaurant. I think it’s the best fish place St. Ives has right now.’

Anne looked around her. It was a small unassuming little café but clean and airy, with white tablecloths. Best of all, it overlooked the harbour and Smitten’s Pier. Other people had started to drift in now and she imagined the ten or so tables would soon all be filled. Obviously Beryl had chosen to meet at 11:45 a.m. for this reason.

She was actually quite happy to be here. Doing something she hadn’t done in quite a while, having lunch out, with a friend. Suddenly realizing that she now regarded Beryl as her friend. And after only two prior meetings, brief ones at that: on the train and at the Tate Gallery. Yet she unquestionably knew that Beryl Penrose was someone with whom she could discuss anything. A competent, intelligent woman who would listen, advise if she could, laugh with or console as needed. All without judgment, misunderstanding, or scorn. Anne’s experience through the years had taught her one didn’t meet women like that often enough.

‘I’m glad you suggested this, Beryl, I’m actually looking forward to that Skate now! Haven’t had one in many years, and it was always one of my favourites. My appetite has suddenly grown too. The sea air seems to be different in Cornwall than Connecticut.’

‘Well it blows from the other direction, of course,’ Beryl smartly retorted and they both laughed.

‘And you could do with some more meat on your bones,’ she continued.

‘So are you telling me that Skate isn’t a fancied fish across the Atlantic?’

‘Strangely enough, it isn’t. Oh, sometimes a newly opened French restaurant in New York will have it on the menu. But then it will disappear. From lack of interest. Even when they call it Raie.’

Beryl shrugged, ‘Ah well, *chacun son gout*. Some people have a thing about eating bottom fish. But tell me about your artist friend.’

Anne laughed, looking down for a moment. ‘He can hardly be called a friend. Not yet, at least, so . . . there isn’t very much to tell. Sunday lunch at the Stonegate’s was very pleasant. But interesting for another reason entirely. When Lady House was mentioned, Nancy Stonegate intimated it had a bit of a strange, even ominous history. Her husband Angus hastily

brushed it all off as a lot of superstitious myth. But then Michael Tollander said he'd also heard rumors.'

Beryl quickly held up her hand. 'No, no, not yet. Tell me about all that later. I need my own unbiased analysis first.' She looked seriously at Anne for a moment, then relaxed. 'Come on, tell me what you think of this Tollander chap? For starters, why is he here in Cornwall?'

The crab cocktails arrived just then and Anne was saved from an immediate answer as she sampled a piece of the thinly sliced brown bread that accompanied them. Then after taking a sip of wine, she began to describe Michael, with a studied air of bland accounting.

This wasn't the time to relate that she actually found him attractive. Or that she was looking forward to meeting him again.

'Well . . . he seems a decent sort of a man. Intelligent, nice manners, comfortable with himself without being egotistical. He's been divorced for some time, and has a grown-up daughter he is fond of. He's been on a two-month painting trip to Greece, then suddenly decided to explore Cornwall before returning right away to the States. He already knew about the old Newlyn and St. Ives art colony.'

Beryl slowly nodded, as she carefully savoured little forkfuls of the crab cocktail. 'And?'

Anne thought for a second. ‘Well, he’s a really good artist! He brought along a sketch he’d done that morning, of the Stonegate’s son bringing their boat in.’

‘Interesting how someone crosses your path at a particular time, isn’t it?’ Beryl said, reaching for another slice of bread. ‘So you’ll be meeting him again soon?’

Anne rolled her eyes to the ceiling and sighed. ‘Are you ‘seeing’ things again? We’re all supposed to go sailing together in another week.’

‘Hey, I don’t *see* things, remember?’ Beryl scolded. ‘I just intuit things. And just sometimes. But it doesn’t take ESP, you know, to deduce that if a nice-looking man smiles at you, he’ll at least want to get to know you better. Does it?’

‘I suppose not.’ Said Anne with a rueful look. ‘But I’m really not interested in meeting another man. Not like that, not romantically. And certainly not yet. It’s too soon.’

‘Things happen at the time they’re supposed to happen,’ Beryl said with a newly serious note to her voice. ‘There are very few coincidences in life, Anne. Think about that sometime.’

Just then their waiter brought the main course. The plates were of a generous size yet the fish proportions were large enough to cover two thirds

of the space. The other third occupied by a mound of fresh chips. Anne had relearned that in Britain French fries was not the accepted term for fried potatoes.

Both women set about dousing their Sole and Skate with liberal amounts of malt vinegar then began to do justice to their meal. Comments were brief and covered random musings and humour, about Cornwall in general, the many changes from the past, and how they might as well be on an island for all that Parliament in London cared.

It was as they were almost finished that Beryl looked up and recognized a woman who had just entered the restaurant. Anne turned her head to follow Beryl's eyes. The woman smiled at Beryl as she passed their table.

'My Ernie still thinks you're a saint, m'dear.'

Beryl grinned and patted her arm. 'Just a lucky insight Rose. But keep making him tell you his plans before he sets out.'

Anne looked at Beryl questioningly, who quickly said. 'It was more logic than intuition.' Then in the silence she continued:

'Her husband was overdue with his fishing boat one night. I happened to be at my sister's house when the lifeboat siren sounded. We walked down to the pier and Rose was there. I simply asked where he'd

been headed. She said Newlyn, to sell his catch. I asked if he'd go further, like Falmouth, if the price wasn't good. And then I suddenly had a vision of the big Black Buoy outside the harbour there. We told the dispatcher who alerted the Lifeboat by radio. Ernie and his boat were clinging to the Buoy by a hawser in some pretty rough waves. His rudder was fouled by fishing line. They towed him off just in time, before the boat was badly damaged.'

Anne swallowed. Beryl said, 'Sometimes the unexplainable reaches out to assist. Sometimes it doesn't. But I want to get back to you! So, when will you see Mr. Tollander again?'

Anne gave a brief shrug, 'If the sailing trip happens, it will be then I suppose.'

'Well that's a good way to get to know a chap, you realize. Nothing like a boat on the open sea to reveal character.'

'Oh yes,' Anne continued, 'He did suggest we get together for lunch sometime – so we can plan to take some food with us on the trip, as a repayment to the Stonegates.'

Beryl laughed. 'Now I really like the cut of his jib. Sharing the mundane chores. And an innocent, respectable reason to meet and talk – and be alone with you.'

‘You are too much!’ Anne had to smile. ‘Have you ever thought about a solidly practical service someday – like, advice to the lovelorn?’

‘I’d be good at it, of course.’ Beryl became serious again. ‘You’re wedding ring is missing, Anne. But I like the design of that one.’

Anne looked down at her hand, automatically twisting the ring. ‘I bought it here in St. Ives. There is this Celtic jeweler, near the Tate gallery and I . . . it looked and felt right. But on this finger.’

Beryl folded her napkin, setting it down on the table. ‘Interesting. Some Celtic patterns have much . . . And now . . . let’s collect our cars and go explore that interesting house you live in.’

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CHAPTER NINE

They agreed Beryl would follow Anne, in her own car, on the drive back to Lady House. Mainly, Beryl explained, because after they got there she wanted to take her time to slowly approach the house and properly absorb her first impressions. Anne was directed to go ahead and stow her car then wait until Beryl parked in front of the house.

Anne swung into the hedge opening of the driveway and proceeded down the old graveled stretch as it curved between the elm trees. She looked back in her rearview mirror and noted Beryl had stopped her car on the rise of ground just inside the gateway. After parking the Mini in the garage she walked slowly back toward the front door. Beryl's car was still stationary but as she stood and watched it soon began a careful approach toward the house. When it finally stopped and Beryl got out there was a preoccupied expression on her face. Anne noticed she paused once more to study the

main façade, looking in both directions, then let her gaze move upwards to include the roofline.

After mounting the three shallow steps up to the terrace and in front of the door Beryl brightly exclaimed, ‘Well, your aunt certainly has a delightful old country retreat here. And *you* my girl have – a fascinating roof over your head.’

‘It’s nicer than I first imagined it would be, I can tell you,’ Anne replied with a smile, relieved that Beryl seemed her usual chipper self again. ‘On the train coming down I was mentally calculating how long I’d last before booking into the Tregenna Castle Hotel.’

Anne unlocked the front door and stepped into the hall before turning to welcome Beryl inside. She studied her friend’s face intently now for an initial reaction. The sun was again flowing through the upper stairwell window and glowing off the wooden banisters and stairs, just as when she herself had first arrived.

Then with a small gasp of dismay she reached out a hand as she saw Beryl almost stumble and come to an abrupt stop. As she made contact with Beryl’s arm a sharp tingle ran up her own, which for the moment, she ignored in her concern.

‘It’s alright, it’s alright,’ Beryl quietly intoned. With a bemused smile and a curious wonder in her eyes she said, ‘I think the spirit of the house, your guardian keeper, has just reached out to me. It was a rather immediate -- but quite benign and friendly contact.’

She slowly stepped forward into the hallway and gazed about her. ‘It may also be a cautionary gesture. We have to take things slowly.’

‘But . . .’ Anne began, only to have Beryl reach out her fingers to gently touch Anne’s cheek. ‘There are many things that can’t always be adequately explained. I’ve found it prudent to simply accept them and not try to rush to conclusions.’

Anne experienced a sense of, not concern exactly, but a new awareness of having entered different territory, with Beryl here beside her. She had spent the past week quite contentedly, even happily, alone within these walls. Now the house took on a different quality for her. Beryl had used the word guardian. Was she being protected? The same way her aunt had always tried to do? Suddenly she recalled the tingle that ran up her arm when she touched Beryl. Her memory reprised that similar experience at Paddington Station, when they had accidentally brushed arms while stowing luggage. On that occasion she had been too preoccupied with her own thoughts, and simply cast it off as . . . static friction on a cold morning.

‘Beryl, when I touched your arm just now, there was . . .’

‘Yes. And this time you noticed.’ Beryl looked at her. The normally confident and controlled expression she always wore now carried a more thoughtful aspect. ‘We have a link running between us, Anne. At first I thought it was just our Celtic bloodlines; sisters under the skin, that sort of thing. Well . . . now I’m wondering if we were destined to meet, for a reason. Since little in life happens by coincidence, I’ve found – let’s just accept it and explore why later.’

Anne took a deep breath. ‘Why don’t we go into the kitchen before I show you around the house. I could make us some tea?’

‘Good idea!’ Beryl said, her broad smile returning. ‘And incidentally, that is a marvelous old grandfather clock there. Your aunt is not only a fascinating woman, she has exceptionally good taste in furnishings.’

‘She is. And she does.’ Anne began to relax. ‘You must meet her when she comes down. Which will be soon, I hope. Everyone keeps reminding me they can’t wait to see her here again.’

As they entered the kitchen and Anne went across to the range to fill the kettle and light the gas, Beryl looked about her with an appreciative eye.

When Anne turned from the stove she saw that her friend's eyes lingered on the wall where the old cellar door was located, the big key hanging beside it.

'Is this the room where you feel most comfortable, Anne?' Beryl inquired.

'Yes, it is! Interesting that you should ask. I also enjoy the old walled garden outside. Nothing unusual about that though is there? Kitchens are really the heart of every house. A place where families gather, to let their hair down, talk about anything and everything.' Anne paused in reflection. 'At least, it used to seem that way – in Connecticut.' Then she shrugged with a brisk dismissal of the subject and proceeded to set out cups and saucers on the table.

'Sorry old girl, didn't mean to remind you of the recent past. Especially since it's the *now* and the *future* we're most concerned with.'

Anne leaned against the kitchen table and looked across to where Beryl had seated herself. 'Funny. Until this week, down here in Cornwall, I haven't been able to look back without still feeling a bit miserable. Now I can, and without any real regrets. And precious little sense of loss. I've turned a corner, haven't I!'

Beryl smiled. 'You have. Good. Some day soon you'll even be able to laugh about it – trust me. Perpetually maintaining a status quo isn't all it's cracked-up to be either.'

Once they were settled with steaming cups of tea in front of them, quietly enjoying the stillness and the afternoon sun that filled the kitchen, Beryl asked Anne to start telling her all the comments about the house she had prevented her repeating while they were at lunch. Along with everything else that had happened since she arrived.

With a comfortable sense of ease, Anne began relating the events of the past week, with a remarkable memory for detail. Even the scene of her initial arrival, finding Millibegs and the pups, hailing Peter Laity and then rudely responding to Michael Tollender. The comments about the house at the Stonegate's Sunday lunch were all described, with everyone's input included. Beryl withheld any comment, letting the flow of words take their course.

Without any hesitation Anne found herself including the personal letter she had discovered from the book in the salon across the hall. This involved adding some background about her aunt's life, along with her own, while she was growing up with Vinnie.

'So your aunt has owned this house for over forty years,' Beryl observed quietly, once Anne finished speaking. 'I wonder if she has some additional history about the previous owners. The Deed would certainly include the names.'

‘I suppose so,’ said Anne. ‘When she comes down we could ask her. The Laity’s up at the farm might also know. Perhaps I should inquire sometime.’

‘Well, we can do some independent research too. But you do realize, this actual house is only recent history. It must have been built over some previous habitation. And that too, perhaps, could cover a pre-existing foundation. I suspect this site is quite an ancient one.’

‘I’ve had that feeling too.’ Anne paused a moment. ‘In fact . . . when I first arrived – this is going to sound silly – I had an instant impression, a fleeting mirage really, as I entered the drive, that it should be round. No . . . not quite that. That a round something, maybe a circular wall was here.’

Beryl nodded. ‘Good precognitive instincts. There might well have been an old fortification. It’s on high ground, within a bowl, has a water source and arable soil, and is just far enough inland from the sea for security from raiders. That was an important prerequisite in Cornwall in olden times. There are many of those sites still uncharted. Archaeology takes money.’

‘We’d need the local historical society too, I think.’ Anne sighed. ‘But I’m not sure that would have anything to do with the myths and rumors. From what I gathered on Sunday, from Nancy Stonegate, those seem fairly recent in origin.’

Beryl stirred herself in the chair, put down her cup and took her arms from the table. ‘Why don’t you give me the guided tour now.’

For the next half-hour they explored all the rooms together, first downstairs then upstairs. Beryl again remarked on Aunt Vinnie’s good taste in furnishings and selection of colors in each room. She was intrigued by the framed photographs in Vinnie’s bedroom that Anne showed her and said that her parents were a handsome young couple.

‘Doesn’t the ‘thirties seem like such a happy, carefree decade from all the old photographs one sees? Everyone always smiling, fashionably dressed, Art Deco modernism all around?’ Beryl sighed. ‘Yet it still contained the tragic aftermath of World War I, coped with the Great Depression, and glimpsed on the horizon yet another terrible war to come.’

After they returned to the kitchen Anne opened the door to the walled garden outside, pausing first to look back at Beryl.

‘I saw you noticed that old door earlier, and the key. It’s to the cellar and I don’t know why Vinnie kept the old door intact when she refurbished and updated the kitchen. Martha warned me not to explore the cellar. It’s not used for storage, I gather. She said it’s full of damp and spiders. But . . . I really want to explore it sometime!’

Beryl nodded. ‘Me too. But we should do it together. Don’t do it alone, Anne. Why don’t we leave it until my next visit? Your house intrigues me and I’d like to come again. But first I want to do some research about its past. My sister is a bit of a historical buff and assists the local institute, also accommodates visiting archaeologists. She works at the library too, so she could find some of the right books on the subject for us.’

They went outside and slowly walked around the walled garden while Beryl exclaimed with delight at how well the fruit shrubs were doing. ‘You’ll have a bumper crop of raspberries – and red and black currants too. In Falmouth we’re supposed to have the mildest climate because we’re on the Channel side – and here you are, on the wild and windy west coast, with these!'

‘Credit young Josh Laity from the farm. He tends it several times a week.’

Anne suddenly recalled offering him a cup of tea one morning, which he gladly accepted, but refused to enter the kitchen to receive, with a remark about ‘not setting a foot inside Lady House.’ At the time she had thought no more about it, assuming Martha would scold him for bringing in dirt on his boots.

Now, in light of what she had recently learned, that the house had acquired a reputation, for something odd to do with men, she wondered if Josh were superstitious. He seemed an otherwise modern young Cornish lad, but might still be heedful of local lore.

Once back inside Beryl gathered up her purse and suggested she should be on her way back home. ‘You are now within a protective shelter, Anne. Lady House was well named. Your aunt, of course, recognized this, which is why she has retained it for so long. And since she has told you it will pass along to you someday we must learn all we can about it. May I call you soon? When I come back we’ll have a few more details. And then we can explore that cellar together! Alright?’

Anne grinned. ‘It’s a deal. Call anytime, and come back soon. My days have become an indolent pleasure so I shall look forward to your return.’

Standing at the front door she waved at Beryl’s receding car and reflected on the strangeness of it all. That she had been nudged (unwillingly) to return to Cornwall by her aunt; that she had met a fascinating friend like Beryl; that the house was not only a comforting retreat, it had also become a fascinating puzzle to explore in the weeks ahead. Mostly, that instead of lonely melancholy she had envisioned

before arriving her life had unexpectedly taken on new interests, new meaning.

After closing the door she paused to look around her. Then after giving the grandfather clock a salutary pat on its smooth oaken sides Anne mounted the staircase to change into her jeans and a shirt. Martha had deposited a beef casserole in the refrigerator this morning that she could heat up for dinner later. It was still only 4 o'clock, she could walk across to the farm and take a look at Millibegs and the pups. And, perhaps, ask a few questions about the house?

But first she had better call Michael Tollander to set up that lunch date when they would arrange the food to buy for the sailing trip on Saturday. After changing her clothes she picked up his card and went downstairs to call him from the kitchen. As she went down the stairs she laughed aloud and said, 'There's so much to do, so many things to remember!'

CHAPTER TEN

Isabelle picked up the telephone and immediately heard, ‘Hello, Great Aunt Vinnie! This is Adam.’ His overly hearty greeting made her patently aware he wanted to speak to his mother so she was quite prepared for his next inquiry. It came without any preamble or small-talk. ‘Is Mom there? I’d like to speak to her please.’

Once they reached adulthood neither of Anne’s sons had ever exhibited interest in the art of communication, although the eldest, Paul, tended to more diplomacy. Obligatory Christmas cards, brief thank-you notes for cheques on their birthdays, seemed the extent of their needs today. She had last seen them both at Paul’s wedding two years ago.

‘No, Adam. She isn’t here right now,’ she replied. ‘Is there anything that I can help you with? And how are you?’

There was a pause on the other end and then Adam said, ‘N-o-o-o. Not really. I’m fine. Will she be back soon?’

‘Well, your mother isn’t in London at the moment. She’s away from the city on a short holiday.’

‘A holiday! She can afford to do that? I mean . . . where did she go? I thought visiting you in London was a holiday for her.’

Isabelle’s face assumed a rueful smile. ‘She was here with me, until I sent her down to Cornwall last week. To my house down there, where I shall join her in a few weeks. Your mother needs a respite from recent events in her life. Is it something urgent Adam?’

Another brief pause before, ‘Well, in a way it is. Can I call her down there? You see . . . there are a lot of problems with the company right now . . . and I’m trying to help Dad out. I wanted to talk to her about it. And . . . well I had an idea that I wanted to bounce off her, so to speak.’

Isabelle frowned. She guessed it had to do with money but wasn’t about to pursue it with him, nor give him the telephone number for Lady House. If Anne chose to do so that was her prerogative only.

‘I see. Perhaps it would be better if she called you Adam. I shall call her and let her know. Please give me the number where you can be reached.’

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In the late afternoon Anne strolled up the lane towards the farm, still musing on Beryl’s visit and feeling quite elated that they would be exploring and uncovering things about Lady House in the weeks ahead. Each day her feelings of attachment increased. More than just a temporary retreat, the new knowledge that her parents had been there years ago made it seem now a vital part of her past, and hers alone. Nothing to do with her previous life spent in America, or her marriage, the children.

As she neared the wide wooden gate, always left open, that led to the farmhouse and walked up the dirt track, she began to anticipate seeing Millie and her pups. Just that morning Martha had told her the puppies now had their eyes open and that all seven – three males, four females – were healthy, lively and handsome as their mother.

She wondered whether she might keep a dog again. A loyal companion she could care for, hug and pet and talk to. The idea was appealing and one of Millie’s pups could just be old enough to travel back with her. Would three months old be too young to travel on a plane? When the time came she could decide. And returning was not something she

wanted to consider right now. But it was only two-and-a-half months away, she remembered with surprise. Time seemed to be passing too quickly. Well . . . if she wasn't ready she would change her airline ticket, return a little later. Not to her old life, of course, only a semblance of it. Once back in Westport, she would have to refashion her existence, begin again.

Oh, stop looking ahead, she silently admonished. What had Beryl said? 'Only the now and the here mattered.' Practical advice. And from here on she must concentrate on being practical. The puppy, for instance. Welsh Border Collies were working dogs that needed space and exercise and animals to herd. She would be away at work during the day, so a quiet and mature spaniel or something was a better choice. A grateful mutt from the pound, as Swindon has been.

At this time of day the farmhouse was always bustling. Most of the family had returned or were about to, any additional helpers were having a talk and a laugh before heading off to their homes; the last necessary feedings and chores with the animals were performed, then the evening meal prepared, to share together. Early-to-bed, early-to-rise was the eternal ritual.

Anne was welcomed inside by Rose, as Martha and Josh returned from the one of the barns after feeding the two horses, checking the sheep were securely penned, scattering grain for the chickens, and now yelling at

the other two Border Collies who loudly barked a warning at Anne to advance no further. Peter Laity and his older son, Gareth, could be seen coming up from the fields after parking the tractors

‘Will ye eat with us tonight, Miss Anne?’ asked Rose. ‘There’s a nice lamb stew with dumplings and an apple crumble.’

‘Oh no, Rose, thank you,’ Anne replied, ‘It sounds lovely – but I had lunch in St. Ives with a friend today, so I’m eating modestly tonight. I’ve just come to take a peek at Millie’s pups. Is it a problem right now?’

‘Course not. Josh or Martha will take you along to see ‘em. Their eyes are open and they’re comin’ along fine. That Millie’s a good mother too.’

Martha came up and said, ‘I was just going to take Millie’s dinner down to her. It’s a good time to see the pups and Millie needs a bit of a break.’

They walked to a smaller barn that was nearer the farmhouse with the other two dogs in close escort. Dan, the young male collie, belonged to Gareth and had fathered Millie’s pups, Anne knew. Moss, the female, showing her advanced years with a graying muzzle, was unrelated to Dan or Millie. She had been the Laity’s first, their only dog for many years, Martha had informed. Mossielove was Peter’s favorite, allowed inside to sit at his

feet each night. She had helped train Dan and Millie to properly herd the sheep, never more than twelve or thirteen and just nine of them right now, and to direct the cows.

The Laity's farm was a smallholding, growing mostly vegetables, but with four cows and the sheep to provide milk, meat, and cheese. There was just enough pasturage, with a field or two left fallow each year, for the animals to graze. Once a tenant farm it was now owned outright by the Laity's. Isabelle Stratton had arranged this after her finances had firmed from working at Charme for many years, and renting out Lady House. With owned property to pass down to their family the Laity's, in gratitude, would always protect and oversee Aunt Vinnie's affairs and the upkeep of Lady House. Anne had been apprised of all this before leaving London, before Vinnie had reminded it would be her house someday.

Inside the barn Millie eagerly jumped down from the raised wooden platform, leaving the pups inside the low wooden barricade lined with straw and sack bedding. To Anne's delight she even wagged her tail at her before tucking into her food bowl.

Martha stepped onto the platform followed by Anne. The huddle of puppies were an endearing sight, black furred with plump pink tummies,

squirming and whimpering. There was no hint yet of their white or brown markings that would appear later.

‘Oh, they’re adorable. Can I touch them, Martha?’

‘Ye can pick one up for a bit, Millie knows yer.’ Martha said, ‘Won’t be long before they’re scampering around everywhere. We’ll have our hands full then, keeping them out of mischief then.’

As Anne cradled the little pup she said, ‘I was thinking about keeping a dog again. One of Millie’s pups would be lovely. Would I be able to buy one?’

Martha gave a snort of laughter. ‘We’ll happily *give* yer one, Miss Anne. Have to find homes for ‘em all. Three dogs on the farm are quite enough. But thoroughbred collies aren’t a trouble there. Gareth’s in-laws-to-be said they’ll take one, maybe two. Gareth’ll be taking Dan with him when he goes, so we jes’ might keep one. Millie’s getting fixed later so this is her first and last litter. Better that way.’

Anne returned the pup to the communal bed and gently stroked the others, musing on the ebb and flow of life in rural Cornwall. Generation after generation of animals monitored and charted. Inbreeding avoided and dispersions carefully arranged. The wisdom of the centuries prevailed with

human offspring too. Still easier to achieve here: still far removed from the blurred amalgam and societal degradations of the crowded cities.

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The grilled cheese sandwich and a salad of fresh sliced tomatoes finished, Anne sipped a coffee at the kitchen table with her notepad and daily calendar beside her. The May nights were becoming lighter and it was still twilight outside. She had been thinking about the sort of food that would be suitable to take for the Sunday sail up to Padstow and making a list of things to buy. Tomorrow she must call Michael Tollander and arrange their lunch so they could arrange it all. As she added another item to her list the telephone in the kitchen rang.

‘Anne dear, how are you?’ Vinnie said, “I hope I’m not disturbing you at dinner.”

‘No, Aunt Vinnie, I’ve just finished,’ said Anne. ‘And I’ve had a lovely day. Before dinner I went up to the farm to see Millie’s puppies. They’re beautiful – I want to keep them all!’

Vinnie laughed, ‘No you wouldn’t, not if knew what havoc puppies can create. That’s a full time job.’ Vinnie paused before continuing, ‘I received a call from Adam today. He asked to speak to you about some

business problems with his father's company. I thought you'd want to call him at a time of your choosing, so I have his number to give you.'

Anne was silent for a second, then, 'Oh dear. Did he give you any details?' Her relaxed mood of carefree content evaporated and she was immediately thrust back to the recent past.

'Not really, nothing specific. He just said he has been working with his father at the business. That he has an idea he wanted to discuss with you.'

'How strange. After ceding all my shares in Fellowtronics I thought I'd ended all the business I shall ever have with it again.' Anne's voice was crisp and firm which, unknown to her right now, Vinnie silently approved.

In as calm voice but just as definite as Anne's had been, Vinnie said, 'I suspect the problem is how to raise more money. And . . . there's only the house. Which is now yours. But that is for you to discover and deal with, of course.'

Anne looked at her watch which showed 7:35 p.m., mentally calculating five hours back. It was still early afternoon back in the States. She could call Adam tonight.

'Thanks, Aunt Vinnie. Give me the number Adam left and I'll call him later.' Anne got up and went to the bureau for pencil and notepad.

‘And thanks too for not giving him the number at Lady House – I’m enjoying my feeling of being distanced from family right now.’

Vinnie smiled. ‘You needed this break Anne dear. I’m happy to play the go-between for you as long as you want.’

‘Oh, when are you coming down? Everyone keeps asking me and I keep saying sometime soon.’

‘Probably in about two weeks, I think,’ Vinnie replied. ‘But try to hold them off for a bit, it’s not definite yet.’

Anne too smiled, ‘I can’t wait to see you myself! I’ve so many things I want to talk about.’

‘All in good time, dear child. We’ll be together soon and then you can fire away. Good night, Anne.’

‘Good night, Aunt Vin. I love you.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

With elbows on the table Anne sat and thought in the ambient comfort of the kitchen, staring out the window where the evening light was slowly fading. Then, eventually overtaken by an urge to experience the outside air, she rose and opened the kitchen door, to slowly walk into and around the walled garden ,which always equaled for her the comfort she always felt in the kitchen.

Looking up at the sky she saw Venus shining brightly amid the other stars that the growing darkness now made visible. The moon too was a

waning silver crescent. With a deep sigh she turned around to gaze at the trees and bushes and the house. It was all so far away from that other life she had left behind in Connecticut. This life, this separate existence, was her very own. So blissfully serene and undemanding, until right now.

While her sons would always have a claim on her heart, their pursuits be of interest, their well-being a concern, that old familiar pattern of 'family' she was used to had changed, become . . . a somewhat different equation. Perhaps for them it seemed not quite severed as it had for her. Yet they had to realize that from now on their parents were separate entities, individuals. No longer a bonded unit, to turn to for advice or support or praise, as before she and Alan parted ways. Each child was an adult, with their own lives to pursue, and they must deal with each parent separately in the future. The traditional concept of home and family had vanished, was gone forever.

Anne felt that she, of all of them, had suffered most from the break-up. It was a separation not of her choosing. Because of this surely she deserved some consideration, at least left free of news and updates about any sundry problems their father might have. With a small sigh she turned back toward the house. Entering again she glanced first at her watch, then at the kitchen clock, and decided it was a good time to call.

The number Vinnie had given, quickly rechecked in her Day Runner, was the condo in Stamford that Adam, and his recent bride Stephanie, shared. Both skilled computer programmers they worked at different corporations in New York. Their pre-wedding reception, fifteen months ago, had been the last big social event she had held at the Westport house. Anne recalled how she had made the house and garden festive with flowers. Stephanie's parents, well-endowed New Yorkers, had been enchanted and impressed.

Her elder son, Paul, an architect, and his gentle wife Norma, had flown out from Seattle for a week to be there, then attend the New York wedding a few days later. Later on, when the split-up became definite, both wives had expressed sympathy to her. But the sensitive Norma had actually cried over the telephone, then written and offered to share their Seattle home for as long as she wanted. By this Anne was encouraged for Paul's future happiness.

The telephone ring three times and Anne braced herself for Stephanie to respond, before Adam's voice came through loud and clear. 'Hello, Adam Fellowes here.'

'Adam dear, it's Mom. Aunt Vinnie says you wanted to talk to me.' Her voice was calm, firm, and friendly. She still sat at the kitchen table,

the phone brought over from the buffet on its long line, and she had poured herself a glass of water.

‘Mom! What are you doing stuck out in the country? Surely London would be a more lively place for you?’

‘Well, Cornwall is the county where I was born, Adam. It’s a lovely land. I spent many happy summer holidays here once.’ Anne had to smile to herself despite the conviction she would not enjoy the discussion ahead. ‘It certainly isn’t without its share of cultural entertainments either!’

‘Oh, right. If you say so. Well . . . things are a bit touch-and-go at Fellotronics right now. Dad’s had to tighten up the operation, let a few workers go, but he does have a hot new client prospect in view. Only trouble is the money-crunch. Since all of us own stock it’s in our interest to try to help in any way we can. Right?’

Adam had always been closest to his father, Anne was well aware. While at college he spent summers working at the company. That he became a computer programmer was no surprise to her, or to Alan. But rather than quickly point out that her own stock had been signed over to Alan, she first wanted to hear the rest of his idea.

‘What did you want to propose, Adam?’

‘Well look – I know you are getting the house on East Ferry Lane, Mom, but I had this idea for a temporary cash infusion for the company. Just a stop-gap – because once this client can be signed up the money flow will get smoother.’

‘Yes?’ Anne guessed immediately what Adam was about to propose. ‘Well . . . we could raise a sizeable loan at the bank on the house. It is owned free-and-clear I understand, so we could get a mortgage on it! Wouldn’t this be practical? Just a temporary measure, of course.’

Anne was silent. There was a slight whoosh of wind against the windows and she remembered the weather report on television that evening had predicted wind and possible rain tomorrow. Her gaze drifted to the old wooden door. For some reason the key on the wall appeared to have moved slightly with the breath of wind.

In a steady voice she answered, ‘Neither loans nor mortgages are temporary things, Adam. There are monthly fees to pay. Who would be paying those?’

Adam had obviously thought this through for his answer was immediate. ‘The company could do that, I’m sure. Or . . . you could help out too. Either or both. You still have your job so it wouldn’t be that difficult. Also – there’s federal tax relief on mortgages.’

When Anne remained silent, Adam quickly said, 'We have to keep Fellotronics afloat, Mom. All of our shares become worthless if it fails. And . . . and Dad is really under pressure right now. He's working until all hours and I'm a bit concerned about him.'

'Adam, I no longer own any shares in the company. I turned them all over to your father. At his request! And in the terms of the divorce – which is about to be final – I don't receive alimony. That house is my sole asset. Do you understand?'

There was a long silence at the other end, then Adam, in a more contrite yet still pleading tone, said, 'Oh Mom, I know this has all been hard on you. But . . . but I don't want either of you to be in financial hardship.'

Anne continued in a steady voice. 'I fully expect and am prepared to be financially restricted when I return. The salary I earn isn't great.'

Reluctant to abandon his idea, Adam continued, 'Wouldn't the house be too large for you now? And with all the memories and everything it might become depressing too. Wouldn't you prefer a bright modern condo now?'

'And how, exactly, could I afford that – unless I sold the house and reinvested some of the income?'

‘Look, this was just an idea I had. I’m trying to be practical as well as fair. But . . . could you just think about it, please?’

‘No.’ Anne replied with determined emphasis. ‘You may have forgotten that in the early years I put a lot of time and effort helping your father start his own company. He (she almost added ‘and his new wife’ but bit back the comment in time) will have to work his own way out of his difficulties. I’m sorry you feel it necessary to become over-involved.’

‘Alright, alright. Sorry if you feel I’m interfering but . . .’

‘You and Stephanie have your own lives to live, Adam. You both have good jobs. And please remember, those shares didn’t cost you a cent. They were given to both you and Paul. If the company fails you yourself have not lost money. Remember that, please.’

After reciprocal farewells and mutual expressions of love, the call ended. Anne was left with a dull feeling of resentment . . . for being called on to keep assisting Alan; for having to seem recalcitrant to her younger son’s ideas. And also, for being reminded about her return to Connecticut – and the house she had had to argue for. Mentally she imagined herself going back, unpacking her bag, looking around, then preparing to return to her work in the library at the college. It all seemed so far off right now. Not something she was eager to do just yet. She was experiencing dislocation

again, a different sort to that of the separation and divorce. Would she still feel so attached to the house again, she wondered? In Alan's eyes it had become just another tradable commodity. Perhaps she too would view it that way when she saw it again.

As she mounted the oak staircase and slowly walked into her bedroom, looking around at the bright décor before undressing, her mood brightened. Lots of time ahead of her yet. At Lady House.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Michael slowly poured red wine into their glasses from the bottle he had ordered. Raising his glass to her he said, 'In any respectable wine guide this would probably be described as 'an unassuming Barolo.' But I thought it was quite decent when I last tried it here.'

Anne smiled as she too raised her glass. 'Well, here's to unassuming.' Taking a sip she lifted her eyebrows and gave a nod of

appreciation. ‘Nice – but not ‘presumptuous.’ What *fun* it must be to write those things! So many adjectives to either praise or disparage.’

Michael rejoined. ‘And after all those tired feet have stomped the grapes for days. Their efforts diminished with one word.’

They had met where he suggested she park her car and walked to this small Italian cafe. Though a sunny day, a cool wind blew in off the sea. Both of them had instantly noted they had dressed alike; in blue jeans with light blue turtleneck sweaters, and jackets. ‘I think it augers well for a unified decision about food for the sailing trip,’ he had remarked. The lighthearted exchange dispelled Anne’s initial stab of awkwardness at meeting him alone. She felt relaxed about their luncheon date now, appreciating his ready humor and his forthright attitude.

Though still uninterested in socializing during the past months she was aware of a void in her life. Men carried different viewpoints to those of women and she had missed this. Marriage conferred a sort of ‘safety zone’ for women in interactions with neighbors, business associates, bringing an ease, a slight lack of formality. When one is single, a solo woman, certain restraints ensued to avoid appearing forward.

They sat at a small table beside a window that overlooked a cobbled street that was just a bit wider than the narrow gray alleys of lower St. Ives, an area where the local fishermen and their families once lived.

‘Mind you,’ he continued, ‘I still crave a Retsina from Attica, but it doesn’t travel well. Greek reds can be a bit iffy.’ Michael took the menus the waiter brought, handing one to Anne. A basket of bread and a dish of olive oil with crushed garlic were set on the table. ‘In Greece – where making wine all began – they haven’t yet bothered about attaining international prestige. They just enjoy.’

Anne studied his expression of happy serenity. ‘I recall you saying you just came from there. Do you visit often?’

‘Oh, I’ve been going there for a long time. Every year if I can. And I can’t think why I haven’t stopped off in Cornwall before this!’ Michael offered the bread basket to Anne, who took two pieces. ‘Have you ever been to Greece?’

Anne shook her head. ‘No, but I hear it’s lovely. We made only a few trips abroad, to France and to Italy. We mostly holidayed in the States because creating the company took lots of time and money. Quickly she

looked away and bit her lip. Damn, why did I say that, she thought? The past and her private life were not something she wanted to discuss with him.

Sensing her discomfort Michael picked up the menu. ‘When you decide to visit, you’re always welcome to accompany one of my student groups. Let’s order lunch.’

As they both perused the menu he named two dishes he had enjoyed. ‘If we bring decent food with us, Anne, we just might be able to persuade Alan to cross the Channel and sail right on down to the Med!’

Anne looked up from the menu. ‘You’re an optimist, Mr Tollander, and a gambler too! Let’s just stick to the Cornish coast for now,’ she said. Then quickly added, ‘Oh good – they have Calamari.’

The waiter appeared, they told him their choices, and after he moved away Michael looked down and across the table to where Anne’s right hand lay. He studied the ring on her third finger and then looked up at her.

‘That’s an interesting design. I would almost swear it’s an old Minoan key pattern. Where did you discover it, if I may ask?’

Anne looked down at the ring. ‘Right here in St. Ives, as a matter of fact. There’s a Celtic jewelry shop, along Back Road West, near the Tate gallery.’

‘Ah, that explains it. He’s a Greek you know, who married and settled here several years ago. Quite artistic himself and intrigued by old Celtic patterns too. We’ve had a few discussions about the perpetuation of motifs and where they originate.’

Anne said, ‘I didn’t know. I just went looking for something and this one appealed to me.’ For a moment she recalled that first day; shedding her wedding ring in Angus Stonehouse’s office, then immediately wanting to replace it. Was this pattern already in her mind? Something she had seen somewhere?

As their food arrived Michael steered the conversation toward how much he was enjoying Cornwall. ‘It’s such a tight little independent community. So different to the rest of England, and contentedly so. And the scenery and light are fantastic. A lot like Greece in that regard.’

‘That’s always been a common observation. The Cornish Riviera.’ Anne replied. ‘and it’s solidly Celtic, just like Wales and Ireland. But you might not like it in winter, it rains a lot.’ As he nodded she continued: ‘You’ve noticed how all the trees are bent eastward by the wind off the ocean.’

Yes, I have. Your uncle, and others, painted some good examples of that. Incidentally, I feel very grateful to your aunt to be occupying his cottage. *When* is she arriving? I can't wait to meet her in person.'

Anne put down her fork, 'Last time we talked she said not too long now. Just another week perhaps. But don't bank on it – she's such an active, independent soul. And she expects everyone else to be too.'

They both chewed on the Calamari, which they had agreed to share as an appetizer, followed by Lemon Soles with pasta marinara. After a pause Anne asked, 'So how long do you plan to remain in Cornwall?'

Michael waved a diffident hand. 'I've no set schedule really. As long as I want. The classes I give don't start until late fall.' He look was direct as he said, 'And you? How long will you be here?'

She looked away, out the window, 'Oh, around the end of July, I suppose.' Then with a tilt of her head, 'That's when my leave of absence will be up. But . . . I may return to London before then. I only managed one play while there and didn't do any shopping at all.'

He laughed. 'London is a great city. I often feel I could easily live there. Well . . . that's three whole months. A lot of time still.' He raised his glass again and indicated Anne should too. 'Here's to many sunny Cornish days ahead for you.'

They finished their lunch, drank coffee, and discussed the positive merits of roast beef sandwiches, a simple green salad, along with cheese and crackers, for the sail. Anne proposed a treacle tart and chocolate biscuits in case they made a pause anywhere for teatime. ‘I will prepare the salad and let me arrange with the Laity’s about the sandwiches. They will do a fine job and can always use the extra income. Then I’ll use good old Marks & Spencer for the rest!’ Michael happily concurred and promised to share the expense.

As their bill arrived Anne pulled her wallet from her bag, and insisted they divide it equally. Michael shook his head, ‘No. This is my treat. Next time you can pay. That way I have a meal on credit to look forward to. You have lots of time fulfill the debt.’

Dropping her head as she leaned away to replace her wallet Anne concealed a smile at his mildly audacious charm. It might take her some time to get used to these casual man-woman interactions again, yet this initial experience had not been difficult at all. She had truly enjoyed herself in his company. Something she knew Beryl might enjoy hearing – along with her aunt too, of course.

Once outside the restaurant the wind had subsided and sunshine warmed the air. ‘Would you like to walk back to the cottage for a quick

look around? It must have been quite a while since last you saw it.' Anne thought for a moment then nodded. 'Alright. It's not far from where I parked.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Along a maze of narrow roads, the granite cottages which once presented a similarity in appearance, now showed bright and varied differences. It all indicated comfortable investment, rather than old original thrift. Tall and narrow, the dwellings were basically two rooms up and two down.

Projections at the rear that once provided modest facilities were now invariably extended, modernized.

Noting the lively painted colors of front doors, window frames, and flower-filled boxes and planters on steps up to the doors, Anne mused aloud how modern prosperity had claimed 'Down-Along.' At Michael's query of the phrase she described how they were the humble dwellings of St. Ives fishermen and their families. Then the shoals of fish disappeared, soon followed by the once large fishing fleet.

She had to explain that 'Up-Along' was where sea captains, businessmen, and tin miners had lived. 'Rarely used today, the old vernacular defined a local class system.'

Michael nodded his understanding. 'Just about everywhere gentrification has occurred. We have a similar situation back in Rhode Island. And even in Greece wealthy newcomers have changed villages forever.'

Anne felt sure Aunt Vinnie must have modernized Uncle Ted's cottage, along with re-decorating it. She was curious to see how it would differ from her earlier memory. Over twenty years had elapsed since she was here and Edward Stratton had been dead for ten of them.

Stopping in the middle of a row of cottages, Michael reached for the key in his pocket. Then bent down to stroke the head of an immense white cat which reposed Sphinx-like on the step. 'Hello Max. Taking your afternoon siesta?'

'Is he yours?' Anne asked with astonishment. 'But you've only been here a few weeks, haven't you?'

Michael laughed. 'No he's not mine. He belongs to the neighbors – or rather they belong to him. Max rules the street, visits everyone, and demands free access. Even the dogs grant him leeway and proper respect.'

With Max leading the way they entered the cottage, which led straight into the front room. At once Anne saw how cleverly Vinnie had devised the suggestion of a small hallway. A tall open shelved bookcase stood on the right, and held painted pots and vases along with books. Mounted on the opposite wall were a variety of wooden pegs and racks for hats and coats, all surrounding a large oval mirror. Just one straight-backed chair beside an umbrella stand completed the 'pause' before one encountered the room.

Anne saw immediately the room was still a studio. Three easels, one large and two smaller, each held canvases. A long narrow table covered with brushes and paints and palettes, and a solitary high-backed stool, were the sole furniture. Yet now, in front of the windows, a long window seat had

been built with arms at each end. It was upholstered in beige linen with large bold flowers in red, blue, and yellow, to match the curtains. From the ceiling bright steel tracks suspended an array of angled lamps.

Just as in her Uncle's time unframed canvases were piled along the baseboards of the walls. Just one or two pictures in frames hung on the walls. The old fireplace held a modern electric fire within its recess, and above it hung one large oil painting. Anne eagerly walked closer. Below a cloud-filled azure sky were distant rough stone walls, in irregular Celtic field patterns. They sloped gently down to the cliffs above golden sands and a jade and blue sea.

Michael watched Anne's face as it held an expression of fond recognition. He said, 'Can you tell me where he painted it, and when? Since I moved here I've wondered because it doesn't appear to be St. Ives.'

Anne nodded still studying it. 'It's called 'Fields of Dreams.' It was painted in Zennor, a few miles south of here. Oh, in the late forties I think It used to be in the flat in London. I wonder why she brought it back here.'

'Perhaps this is where it belongs, where his spirit resides? Houses can be invested with strong emotions of those who lived there, sometimes.'

Anne turned to look at him keenly. 'Do you really believe that sort of thing? I think you're developing a Celtic tilt!'

He nodded. 'Mmm, yes, I do believe that. But only some houses – only with some people. And only sometimes.'

Anne looked back at the painting. 'This particular painting, 'Fields of Dreams,' won him an early prize at the Newlyn Exhibition. He gave it to Vinnie as a gift. I suppose, for all her support in the early days. Lean years for them both after my grandmother died, then with Depression and all.'

As she slowly turned around Anne's gaze lighted on the easels and their canvases. The large one with bright colors was of a small harbor, a hilly background, and a different blue sea. 'Oh Michael, these are yours aren't they?' she exclaimed moving closer to view it.

'Yes. That one is of a village in Greece, in the eastern Peloponnese. I want to add some finishing detail before I ship it back to the U.S.' He paused then quietly added, 'It's the village my mother came from.'

Anne stared at him in surprise and he smiled. 'Did I forget to mention that I'm half Greek?'

'So. . . so that's why . . . you go back so often?'

'Partly I suppose. But I also happen to love the country, the climate, the people. And I do speak Greek, which helps.'

Anne nodded and smiled. Hastily looking at the easel to the left she saw a scene that looked vaguely familiar. ‘Is that Padstow? But that is where I was born. I went to school there until I was eight.’

‘Yes, Padstow it is – but I didn’t know you came from there! It’s a lovely little town. There’s so much to explore in Cornwall I could spend months here. I particularly fell in love with Port Isaac too.’

As she moved toward the other easel Anne abruptly halted and her expression became serious. ‘But this . . . this is Lady House! When did you do that?’

Michael observed her carefully. ‘I first sketched it while I was living at Laity Farm, then later finished the painting details. I hope it doesn’t bother you. You weren’t too happy to find me nearby that first afternoon.’

Staring at the small water color Anne felt conflict: admiration for the detailed study, but also a stab of possessiveness . . . and of intrusion again. Then came a surprising surge of concern. For him: this pleasant man, a visiting stranger, an artist who had innocently portrayed a charming old Cornish house. Yet one that might hold a vaguely ominous reputation of danger toward his gender.

With the intent to casually parry his query she waved her arm in a dismissive gesture. ‘Please don’t judge me by that afternoon. I was tired

and anxious. It is a *lovely* study. Some interesting things are happening with the Lady House mystery. I'd like to discuss them with you sometime. Not now though – I really have to be going. Can I just take a quick peek at the rest of the cottage?’

‘Of course! Come on. I shall look forward to talking with you about anything and everything when you’re ready. We won’t have a chance to do that on the Sunday sail though. But . . . we’ve lots of time ahead.’

Anne expressed delight at how the small kitchen and the bathroom beyond had been refurbished. The two upper rooms, both small bedrooms with the back one serving as a study-cum-office, had been blessed with Vinnie’s aesthetic touches, a modernity that still incorporated a touch of the past.

As Michael escorted her down the steps outside the front door, Max too stalked out and slowly proceeded toward his own dwelling next door. They both laughed. Anne held out her hand, ‘See you on Sunday, Michael. And thank you. I enjoyed this visit to the cottage – and lunch too.’

‘I can walk you back to your car, you know,’ Michael said. But she shook her head. ‘It’s just a few steps away.’

‘Till Sunday then. Enjoy the week – and don’t forget to invoke blessings from the weather gods!’ He turned and with a wave went back into the cottage and closed the door.

Approaching the wall of canvases he carefully removed one from behind three others. He placed it over the one of Lady House. ‘A bit too soon for her to see this, I think.’ There was a gentle expression in his brown eyes as he studied Anne’s portrait with a faint smile.

He had first sketched then painted the head and shoulders likeness of a woman, the background an open field and a stone wall. The attractive face with its fine bone structure was alive with intense emotion, blue eyes wide, lips separated as if about to speak, her blonde hair slightly windblown.

Above the casual blue sweatshirt she presented an air, an almost aristocratic sureness of purpose.

‘An unusual woman. And I’m certain her aunt is too.’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Anne paused while unlocking the car door to glance at her watch. Still early afternoon she saw. When she got home she had planned to visit the Laity’s. Not just to arrange for Sunday’s packed lunch but also to gently probe, with

some casual questions, the rumors surrounding Lady House. After getting into the car she sat for a moment before starting the engine.

That could really be done tomorrow, or even the next day, she decided. What she really felt like doing, right now, on a sudden whim, was different. She wanted to visit a few shops, and to . . . look at some different clothing. Mulling this urge with a bemused smile she started the car and decided to drive into Penzance, just eight miles away.

‘First step to a new life is new clothes!’ Her aunt had humorously observed when trying to take her shopping in London. ‘You do have that account I’ve set-up for you, you know.’ Some years past, while visiting Anne in Connecticut, she had told her of the personal account, and the annual deposits made with a London bank. Instituted, she explained, as a legal way for Anne to avoid excessive death duty taxes when Vinnie departed the scene someday. The cheque book had accompanied her when she left Connecticut but had yet to be used.

Well, at least I shall be making my aunt happy, she decided. Vinnie had raised her to always have a firm regard for personal appearance. Then too summer weather was ahead, when she would need a few lighter things because . . . she had no firm plans, in fact, to return to London. Despite her response to Michael’s question on how long she planned to stay, she had not

even considered it. Too many other interesting things were developing around her to think about it, let alone make plans.

Cautiously negotiating the round-about at High Street onto the Stennack road she soon turned left and headed south along the B3311. Open countryside and light traffic enabled her to relax, also to think. And to finally admit – because she was too old to fool herself – the real reason she wanted to shop. While the jeans she was wearing would again suffice for the sailing trip on Sunday, at the Tate reception and the Sunday lunch at the Stonegate's her entire social wardrobe had been utilized. Her aunt was going to arrive soon and would certainly entertain Mr. Tollender. Vanity dictated at least one different outfit!

Approaching the historic old metropolis of Penzance, Anne concentrated on looking for a parking place close to the central shopping area. On a Tuesday in mid-May there should not be many tourists, she hoped, as there would surely be later. When a paying-lot revealed a few vacant spaces she promptly entered, then secured a two-hour ticket after dropping coins into one of the nearby machines.

With a sense of accomplishment she walked out onto the town's main thoroughfare of Market Jew Street. Anne knew that 'upcountry' visitors were unaware that rather misleading name derives from Marghas Yow, old

Cornish for Thursday Market. With a warm sun and a light wind the view over Mount's Bay was clear and lovely. Several large vessels sat on the horizon out to sea, too distant to discern whether naval or cargo ships. Below the street, the protective arms of the harbour held a slew of fishing boats from various Cornish ports. Local ones with their identifying PZ painted on the hulls and at least two, she saw, bearing the SS of St. Ives.

As she continued walking into town she reached Chapel Street, noting anew after so many years its gracious old Georgian, Victorian and Regency buildings. And many shops she was determined to explore. Along with a light-hearted sense of adventure, Anne experienced another feeling: a sense of belonging, a renewed pride in her ancestral roots. Cornwall was where she had been born, had often returned to for holidays with Vinnie during her youth. Yet never once had she the chance to return till now, or to share it all with her husband and sons.

Their interest might have been minimal at best she supposed but her own was being revived. Long suppressed and sublimated to Alan's desire for a new life in America she was recapturing a vital part of herself. Now free and unleashed from her former life there was delight in returning to the land of her origins, a comfort in this 'sense of place.'

Michael's remarks over lunch today about his feeling of identity with Greece, though still a proud New Englander, had perhaps prompted her reflections about the past and about the present. Certainly his painting of Lady House had occasioned a possessive pride in her, as well as his appreciation of Uncle Ted's paintings of Cornwall. He asked if she might explore it all with him too.

With a giddy sense of joy she caught sight of a particular shade of blue in a dress on a mannequin in a store window and crossed the street to see more.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Juggling several paper carrier bags and a few smaller wrapped packages Anne opened the front door and stepped inside, sideways. After shouldering the door closed she walked toward the staircase, and then heard Martha's

voice call out to her from the kitchen. Dropping the bags onto the first stair with a sigh of content she called back.

‘Just got back, Martha – I’ll be right there.’

When she entered the kitchen she saw that Martha was putting some things away in the refrigerator. Anne made a beeline for the range to put on the kettle for some tea.

Martha said, ‘I jest brought over some Shepherd’s Pie, and a bit of cheese, with a few roasted beets. But Rosie has asked me to persuade you to come to the farm for dinner tonight. It’s a leg of lamb with new potatoes!’

Anne laughed. ‘You are all trying to fatten me up, Martha. But it sounds delicious. I’d love to come.’

‘Good. ‘Cos there’s a Bakewell Tart too for dessert. Yer see we’ve got another renter so we’re doing a fancier meal for a Tuesday night. It’s a teacher lady and she’ll be hungry after all her traveling.’

‘That’s lovely, Martha. ‘Anne knew the Laity’s would not have so casually invited Vinnie, but they could easily ask her. Pleased to be able present her, for conversation with their guest. ‘What time do you want me? I went shopping in Penzance – and right now I’m just dying for a cup of tea!’

‘Come around six o’clock. Or jest right after. Then you can enjoy a glass of cider or some wine first.’

Anne was pleased she could then arrange the Sunday lunch basket with the Laity’s today after all. Although any questions about Lady House, and its past mysteries, would not be appropriate, not with a stranger present. Oh well, another occasion would occur.

Martha finished folding the bag in which she had brought the food. ‘Oh yes – and your auntie called. I left the note on the table.’ As Anne looked across to her she saw Martha wore a little smile.

‘And did she say anything about when she might be coming down?’ Martha’s smile grew wider. ‘She’s thinking just another week ‘til she arrives.’

‘Oh Martha – that’s wonderful. As soon as I’ve finished my tea and sorted out my shopping I’ll call her back.’

Later, as she carried her bags up the staircase, Anne reminded herself to call Beryl too, who would be especially keen to learn that Vinnie would soon be here. Michael would also be pleased; but she could tell him on Sunday.

Dropping the bags onto her bed she carefully opened the large one and drew out a silky cotton and rayon dress, with a deep V-neckline and three-

quarter sleeves which belled out at the edges. Anne had rarely worn prints but this was a soft paisley pattern of sapphire-blues and navy on a lighter blue background. Before slipping it onto a hanger she held it up against her in front of the wardrobe mirror with a nod of approval. A flared cotton skirt in multiple stripes, a blouse, and several T-shirts that matched the stripes, were folded and put away. The last package was a pair of navy blue strapped sandals which she held out to admire before putting them away.

There was still plenty of time before she needed to walk across to the Laity's farm. As she went downstairs she paused midway, a hand on the banister. Late afternoon sunshine flowed through the landing window again to bathe the hall with a golden light so all the woodwork gleamed. Anne began to feel it was a special benison. It always seemed to reach out and embrace her. As it had that first day she entered, was it just one week ago? To make her know this was a home, her real home, her shelter from the stress of the past.

In the kitchen she dialed Vinnie's number and waited with a light-hearted feeling of content. She was managing her 'new life' fairly well – and rather enjoying it too!

'Martha told me you called, Aunt Vin . . . that you will be coming down in another week. I'm so happy to hear that. I've so much to tell you.'

She heard Vinnie's laugh, 'I'm sure you do. And I shall be happy to hear it all. I, too, will have lots to tell you.'

'So when exactly will you arrive?' Anne eagerly inquired. 'Your artist tenant in Uncle Ted's cottage, Michael Tollander, just can't wait to meet you!'

'I will have the flat here closed-up in another week.' Vinnie replied, 'So on Thursday, May 26th I will take the regular train down from St. Pancras.'

'Wonderful. I shall meet you. In your own car!' Anne declared proudly.

'Oh, good. I'm glad you are driving it. Have you ventured far with it yet?'

'Indeed I have – all the way to Penzance today. And I actually went shopping and bought some clothes. What do you think of that?'

Vinnie laughed, 'About time! We shall go shopping again together too. In Truro there are some good stores you must explore.'

Vinnie's features became suffused with an expression of satisfaction. The strange and mystical charm of Lady House was certainly exerting its influence on her niece. Already she could discern a carefree attitude in Anne's voice. Eventually there was so much she must reveal to Anne and

the weeks ahead would be appropriate. As some things were better read, in stages, she would take her diary with her.

‘Alright, Anne darling. I’ll let you go. Martha said you will dine at the farm tonight. Enjoy your sail on Sunday with the Stonehouse’s and tell them I will look forward to being with them soon.’

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While the delicious scent of roasting lamb pervaded from the Laity’s kitchen, and Rosie and Martha bustled in around there, on the small stone terrace outside, Anne began conversing with the Laity’s new boarder over glasses of wine.

Alice Blaine initially appeared to be a pleasant enough woman, somewhere in her late thirties or early forties. An English teacher at a girl’s school in Warwickshire. She was also someone with decided opinions on many subjects, and not reluctant to express them. Nor shy about asking questions.

‘I was told you live in the big house over there. Owned by a London lady I gather, your aunt. Nice to drop in to your tenant farmer’s to eat, eh?’

Anne quietly bridled. ‘They are not tenant farmers, Ms Blaine. The Laity’s own their farm. I’m visiting briefly, and staying at my aunt’s house. For the past few decades Connecticut has been my home.’

‘America! What are doing here? Must seem like the back-of-beyond after everywhere there is to visit there.’

Anne forced a smile. ‘I was born in Cornwall, so was my aunt. Cornwall is our ancestral home – a beautiful land, which I hope will not be changed by strangers moving here. And why are you visiting, may I ask?’

Alice Blaine smiled, impervious to Anne’s barbed comment. ‘I’m here to soak up some sun on the beach and do a bit of walking. They say Carbis Bay is a good spot. I’m simply happy to exchange the cackling sound of chickens to the cackle of silly girls all year!'

They were both called in to dinner then to Anne’s relief. The dinner table conversation was dominated, mercifully, by the Laity’s talk about the animals, the crops, and the upcoming shows that would soon be occurring. While helping to clear the table, Anne was able to make her request for the Sunday picnic basket.

Able to make her departure at an early hour Anne managed to dodge a thinly veiled desire by the boarder to ‘take a look at the big house’. She quickly wished Alice Blaine a happy holiday while she was here, hugged Rosie and Martha, and walked along the lanes home with a sense of relief.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Anne woke with vague impressions of dreams she had had during the night. Of people talking, people she knew, objects being handled, passed around, but all was elusive now, fragmentary. Lying beneath the covers with her eyes fully open, she tried hard to recall them as she surveyed the room, then looked toward the windows where early morning sunlight could be glimpsed.

There was something, a particular something from her dreams, she felt it was important for her to remember but it had receded. With a sigh she stretched and flung back the blankets. Another fine day by the looks of it she happily thought.

It was Wednesday; there were things to be done. As she shed her nightgown it occurred to her one of them was to remove from the bureau drawer her daily calendar, which she always used to carry in her purse. Since arriving she had not used it at all, believing it unnecessary. Her days would drift by, she had imagined, without the need to record anything worthwhile. Instead, a progression of unanticipated events and engagements had occurred, with undoubtedly more to come, which she ought to register. Collecting her aunt on Thursday, May the 26th was one of them!

After finishing her bath Anne could not resist selecting one of her new T-shirts to wear with her jeans. Colored a rich shade of amber she paused to admire it in the mirror, seeing that it flattered her tawny blonde coloring. Then because the morning air was still cool she pulled the dark blue fleece sweatshirt over it.

The bed was straightened-up and before leaving the room she opened the bureau drawer to take out the slim leather-bound calendar. Casually leafing through the pages to reach the present week in May she noted, with

surprise, her last written entry was her flight from New York to London on May the second. Fifteen days ago. Yet she felt she had experienced a whole month of activity rather than a bare two weeks. It wasn't just the short time of it all, it was the way she had become engaged and involved with new people, with a new set of interests in her life, she realized. With a happy grin she headed out to go downstairs and make some breakfast for herself before Martha arrived.

First turning on the kitchen radio for the morning news, at low volume, she sat at the kitchen table with a cup of hot milky coffee nearby and took up the calendar, slipping the pen from its holder. After filling in the date of her aunt's arrival, she began to write-in the events of her days since she arrived. Lifting her head for a moment her eyes caught sight of the old key beside the basement door, then remained fixated on it. A fragment from her dream suddenly returned. That key . . . it had been passed to her. By hands that were slim and dusky, feminine hands she was sure. They had gently enfolded her own hands as she took hold of the key.

But that was all. Nothing else from the dream returned. With a strange sense of something both completed and about to begin, she reached for the coffee cup and quietly sipped from it. Her singular thought before

she heard Martha's step on the flagstones outside was, that she must also call Beryl – and remember to tell her of this.

‘That new boarder of ours, she isn't exactly a modest type is she?’

Martha exclaimed as she entered the kitchen. ‘Left her trying to tell Rosie how to better organize the geese and chickens, so she didn't hafta’ go hunting for their eggs! Can you imagine? Sorry if she might've upset you last night – we'll keep her away from Lady House as well as we can.’

Anne laughed. ‘Don't worry Martha. I think she is so used to ordering others around at her school, and getting her own way, she can't ever stop.’

‘Jest glad she she's active enough to take herself off all day we are.’
Martha replied with a sniff. ‘And ye don't hafta’ be buying those Marks and Spencer treacle tarts for your Sunday sailing picnic, Miss Anne. We'll do those too and they'll be right better.’

‘Are you sure, Martha? You have enough on your hands?’

‘Course I'm sure,’ said Martha, proceeding to tidy up the kitchen, ‘Tis better that way. Ye'll then be all packed and ready to go.’

Anne left the kitchen and walked into the back lounge to make her telephone call to Beryl, noting the time on her wristwatch as a little before

ten. But just as she was about to dial the number on the card she had slipped inside her calendar, the phone rang.

‘Anne? Hope I’m not disturbing you my dear.’ Beryl’s voice sounded happily expectant.

‘No – in fact you must really be clairvoyant, Beryl – I was reaching for the phone to call you.’ Anne replied.

‘Oh? Anything important happen?’

‘Yes. One thing especially,’ Anne replied. ‘My aunt called last night and she will definitely be arriving in another week, on the 26th.’

‘Ah. That’s good news for you. And it means we should hurry things up in our investigation before she gets here too. My sister, bless her heart, is quick off the mark with research. She has discovered some interesting background to Lady House. But tell me first . . . did you enjoy your luncheon with Michael Tollander?’

Anne felt a blush coming on. ‘Oh Beryl, it was just a lunch to organize food for the sail on Sunday. But . . . you might be fascinated to learn that he too is rather eager to explore any mysteries about the house.’

‘Good. And I’m not surprised,’ replied Beryl, ‘The more input the better, I’ve always felt. Here’s what I’m suggesting. We all get together – that’s you, me, my sister Stella, and Michael Tollander too if he wants – and

I think it should be at Stella's house, not at Lady House. Remember I told you she lives nearby, in Carbis Bay?"

Anne paused, 'Any particular reason for not coming over here?'

'Yes. First, Stella has all her books and documents at home. And two . . . the things we are all trying to discover about past history are better done away from Lady House, where the numen is all pervasive. Particularly when it involves you.'

'Numen?' Anne said.

'That's right, numen. It's a Latin word that simply means the spirit of a place. The guardian spirit of the house. And in this case, of you!'

Anne fell silent for a moment, then, 'Alright, I get it, I think. When do you propose we get-together? I've nothing doing for the next couple of days.'

'Good.' Beryl replied. 'How about tomorrow? On Thursday, say 10 o'clock in the morning. You could even call Michael, see whether or not he can make it to.'

'You sound so positive and organized, Beryl,' Anne said, 'Now I'm going to wonder all day what revelations are coming.'

‘Don’t get your hopes up. It’s all just background stuff so far. But it’s a beginning. Alright?’

‘Alright. Tomorrow at ten. Now you have to give me the address.’

After Anne had written down the details she went to sit down on the couch that faced the windows into the walled garden and stared out. It was all becoming intriguing but suddenly she had doubts. Events seemed to be racing along too swiftly. Then there was Aunt Vinnie. She would have to be told, of course, after she arrived. What would be her reaction to strangers making inquiries about her own property? For some inexplicable reason Anne believed Aunt Vinnie would probably approve, might even be willing to contribute some background.

Martha had said her goodbyes and left and, still sitting, gazing out the window at nothing in particular, Anne was surprised to hear the telephone ring yet again. The voice on the line, which she instantly recognized, was an added surprise.

‘Good morning to you too, Michael.’ Anne responded.

‘It’s a sunny day and a mad, impromptu thought occurred,’ he continued, ‘Would you be free, and/or willing, to join me in a drive to Zennor this morning?’

‘Well . . . I . . .’ Anne began hesitantly.

‘I’ve been studying an Ordnance Survey map – but you would be the best guide for this.’ Michael stated quite matter-of-factly. ‘The rather elderly jalopy I am renting needs a run every few days. And I’ll even throw in lunch at a pub as an added inducement.’

She absorbed the calm and decisive tone of his voice. Instead of it being irritating, however, she felt . . . a distinct tinge of pleasure for the invitation, and a little bit flattered.

‘Well . . . I honestly don’t have any plans for today. Tomorrow I do. So, I suppose the answer is yes. But you don’t want to drive up here so why don’t I drive into St. Ives as I did yesterday?’

‘No,’ Michael stated firmly, ‘It’s such a short run. Would 11:30 be good for you? I’ll simply park outside the front door – and if you are a bit slow coming out, I promise not to toot the horn.’

Anne laughed. ‘That would be alright, I suppose. But be sure to wear sturdy shoes, there will be some walking involved. And take a jacket. The weather changes fast out here on the coast.’

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On the drive back to St. Ives their conversation had been slight and impersonal, with Michael remarking on the incredible resemblance of the

light today to that of Greece. Anne remarked that he hadn't yet seen a good Sou-Westerly wind of winter, when it could rain incessantly for days.

Once the car had climbed the steep hill out of St. Ives, the scenery on the road to Zennor changed dramatically. Heather and gorse coated the hills on either side of the road and there were still wildflowers growing on the rough moorland ahead of them. A few farms studded the landscape.

‘This contrast is amazing.’ Michael said eagerly. ‘St. Ives is so calm and gently snug down there behind us. Here it is . . . high and rough and remote.’

Anne smiled. With a hint of native pride she said, ‘You are now in the ‘high countries.’ That is how Zennor, Morvah, and Towednack, were once referred to. The people are different too.’

‘Just five miles away but what a difference.’

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On the drive in to St. Ives their conversation had been slight and impersonal, with Michael again liking the resemblance of the light today to that of Greece. With an occasional discreet glance at him Anne could discern he had an almost boyish enthusiasm, an eagerness. She found it charming and it began to infect her own spirits. They were off on a spontaneous adventure of sorts. A lot of years had elapsed since that had happened for her.

‘But you still haven’t yet seen a good Sou-Wester wind blowing in off the sea,’ she said complacently. ‘And in winter it can rains incessantly.’

He grinned. ‘I’ve heard about it. In fact one of your famed artists of the past painted it. Norman Garstin’s, “The Rain it Raineth Every Day.” I see they even sell postcards of that one.’

She chuckled. ‘It’s particularly popular with those unlucky tourists who experience bad weather while here.’

Once Michael had steered the car up the steep hill out of St. Ives and turned right, onto the road to Zennor, the scenery changed rather dramatically. Heather and gorse coated the granite hills on either side of the road and there were still wildflowers growing on the rough moorland ahead of them. A few scant farms studded the landscape as they passed.

‘This contrast is amazing,’ Michael said with a hint of awe. ‘St. Ives is so calm and snug down there. But here it is . . . high and rough and remote.’

With a hint of native pride, Anne replied, ‘You are now in the ‘high countries.’ That’s how Zennor, Morvah, and Towednack were once referred to – just small villages actually. The people are a bit different too; tougher, more resilient.’

The road curved and wound and soon they approached the outskirts of Zennor. Always the blue ocean was in view from this higher point above tall cliffs.

‘We’ve come just five miles,’ said Michael, ‘Yet it seems much more because of the contrast.’

‘We shall have to do some walking,’ Anne warned, ‘So we must find a place to park the car in Zennor.’

‘And after our walk, can we get some lunch in that pub?’

‘At The Tinner’s Arms? Yes. I think it has been here forever. As I remember it’s small and dark inside, but they’ll be good for a Ploughman’s Lunch at least.’ Anne agreed.

After they had found a spot to leave the car, near the Church across from the pub, Michael removed a small knapsack from the back seat and Anne indicated from where they should set off. Before slinging the sack over his shoulder he pulled a small camera out.

Anne looked at him with surprise, ‘A camera? No sketchpads today?’
‘Oh I have them but I often use a camera too. This seems a likely day to use one. Look at the blue of the sea!’

They set off across rough ground in the direction of the high cliffs and Anne pointed out the craggy headland in the distance. 'That's Gurnard's Head. It still has the remains of an old cliff castle.'

After a couple of wooden stiles were crossed and about ten minutes of walking, from a rise in the ground they could see the purpose of their trip. The patchwork of small, irregularly shaped Celtic field patterns, bounded with low granite walls.

'I'm not sure exactly where Uncle Ted took his position from but I think it might be over there.' Anne pointed in the distance to a place on their right, closer to the cliffs.

'That looks about right.' Michael responded in a distracted tone. 'His perspective would be looking back, toward St. Ives.' He had already begun taking some shots of the view ahead.

They had to advance to their left in a circuit of the walls and suddenly Michael bent down to examine the stones in one of them.

'These are really old walls. Granite. And all hand set.' He observed. 'In Bronze Age times, I believe,' said Anne, 'But someone once said a few of them were built before the Pyramids in Egypt.'

'Hmm. Could be. That's about four-and-a-half thousand years ago.'
'Are you sure?'

'Well the Djoser pyramid – known as the Step Pyramid – was built about 2,600 BC. And that's supposed to be the earliest one. Now we're up to more than four-and-a-half-thousand.'

'You're really up on your archaeology. Does a degree in art involve knowing about the art of the ancients?' Anne inquired.

Michael had straightened up, taken a snapshot, and turned to face her. 'Not really. Though I think it should. But if you are Greek – or half-Greek in my case – you can't help being aware of the past.'

He walked closer to where she stood. 'Thank you, Anne.' He said with a smile. 'I do appreciate your company today. In the weeks ahead would you leave some more of your time open? There are all sorts of other places I want to explore before I leave.'

Anne looked into his smiling brown eyes then quickly dropped her own and turned back to face the direction of their walk. His eyes had held a hint of something, she thought; more intent than simple appreciation. With an attempt to distract, she stated, 'I was going to wait until we had lunch to tell you, but now is as good a time as any. Aunt Vinnie will arrive on the 26th. Just ten days from now.'

'Ah. That's so good to hear. I already feel as though I know her.'

Anne smiled. ‘Everyone likes Aunt Vin. She still is the wisest woman I’ve ever known.’

They were continuing their walk over the rough ground and Michael paused a moment before saying, ‘She raised you, didn’t she.’

Anne looked at him in surprise. ‘Who told you that? It’s true, of course. My parents were killed in a car crash in France when I was eight, and Aunt Vin took over. She used to say, I was the daughter she never had.’

Michael’s look was now serious yet his tone light as he replied, ‘The Laity’s told me. They feel very attached to your aunt – and equally fond of you.’

‘I forgot. Of course, you stayed with them for a while.’ She replied. Now she wondered how much else he had learned. What might they have told him about Lady House. In the ‘thirties it was Peter’s father, John Laity, who farmed there. Peter was still a boy, about Josh’s age now. Though curious to learn what stories may have passed she was not yet inclined to inquire. And she wasn’t sure she would tell him now about Beryl, and Stella, and tomorrow’s get-together to investigate the past.

As they reached a track that led through the walls into a field, Anne advised they turn onto it, in order to reach closer to the cliffs. ‘We’d better

keep to this track so we don't upset the farmer. Just beyond the farm should be the right place.'

'Right.' Michael agreed. 'You're a pretty good walker, Anne! If you would like to see Greece next Spring, I could use your help with the group of art students I take there.'

Anne's response was restrained. 'Thanks. But I still have to get through this year before I make any plans for the next one.' Wondering if she had sounded too dismissive she gave a quick sidelong glance at his face. His amiable expression remained the same.

After another spell of brisk walking Michael paused. 'This looks like the right perspective. What do you say?'

'Y-e-s. It does seem to be the same view.' There was a quiet uplift of joy as she studied the landscape, with a tinge of pride. Her uncle's paintings, especially 'Fields of Dreams,' lauded by his own fellow artists, captured for all time this lovely land of her origins.

Michael snapped several shots with the camera. 'Remarkably it's almost exactly the same, but . . . in his painting, at the farthest edge, there is one small field that is purple-hued. What kind of herbage or crop might that have been?'

‘I think Crocus, probably.’ Anne responded at once. ‘For saffron: there used to be many saffron farms in Cornwall. Hand labour, mostly by women, who plucked the central threads. Saffron Cakes are still sold in Cornish bakeshops, haven’t you tried them yet?’

Michael was slow to answer and appeared to be caught up in a strange reverie. Then he turned to face her. ‘The Crocus-gatherers! It is a famous Minoan fresco at Knossos in Crete.’

Anne looked at him nonplussed, unable to answer at first. Then, ‘Well, it was an important spice. Grown everywhere I suppose. It is said the Phoenicians brought it here and traded it for tin.’

He sat down on one of the low walls then slowly started speaking. ‘Ever since I’ve arrived here in Cornwall – which was on a sudden whim really – I’ve had the strangest feeling. Almost as though that I was *meant* to come. At this time. Have you ever experienced that sensation in your life, Anne?’

She swallowed quickly then turned to look out at the ocean. ‘I – I – I don’t really know. But a lady, who I met on the train coming down last week, told me . . . such things happen.’ Anne turned, then with a sudden smile continued, ‘She’s a psychic! Her name’s Beryl Penrose. I’m seeing

her again tomorrow.' A spontaneous fit of giggles began. 'Perhaps *you* ought to talk to her.'

As they gazed at each other Michael started to laugh too. Both of them becoming immersed in a rich laughter of true merriment like a pair of children, which finally had them rubbing their eyes to clear the tears of mirth.

'Oh for heaven's sake,' Anne at last declared, 'Just – let's get back to that pub before it closes. I'm starving – and I think we both could use a drink.'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Seated beside each other, on a curved wooden bench with a slatted back at a table inside the pub, Anne and Michael finished off the crabmeat sandwiches and Plowman's lunch they had ordered. At the bar across the room, four or five locals were engaged with the publican in a laughing dispute about something or other, all respectfully oblivious to the two strangers.

Between hungry mouthfuls of food, and at Michael's urging, Anne told him about meeting Beryl, her curious pronouncements, the visit to Lady House, and the recently planned enquiries now taking place. Far from appearing dubious or dismissive Michael showed a keen interest.

‘This is the sort of mystery that intrigues me. It could even prove important for all sorts of reasons.’

‘This morning, on the phone, Beryl told me the house had numen, a spirit that prevailed.’

‘A good word,’ Michael said, ‘And I agree. For the ancient Greeks it was ichor, a psychic or magical power of a spirit. Lady House certainly has an aura.

‘When I mentioned your interest in the house . . . Beryl said you could join us tomorrow if you wanted to.’

Anne looked cautiously at Michael as she slowly said this. ‘She thinks the more heads involved the better. But I don’t want you to think – ’

‘I know,’ Michael laughed. ‘You don’t want me to assume the invitation is anything more than general interest, right? I think I shall quite like Beryl, she sounds like a competent investigator. And yes . . . I would like to join in this research project.’

Anne paused a while. Then said, ‘Perhaps you could drive up to the lane around 10:40 a.m. or so, and I’ll drive out and you can follow me to her sister’s house in Carbis Bay.’

‘Good idea.’ Michael reached out lightly patted her on the arm. He withdrew his hand and continued, ‘Perhaps it is time you and I discussed a few personal things. You are still in a recovery state from a recent divorce. And I – ’

‘How did you know that? Anne interrupted.
‘Doesn’t take genius, Anne. And if you must know it was George, the Greek jeweler. You told his wife you’d lost a husband, not a ring. Believe me – the Cornish have nothing on the Greeks for gossip.’

‘But – ’
‘But nothing. Just know I understand. Adjustment takes time. When I first met you I was . . . I wanted to get to know you. You showed an

ability to live and to laugh, but on your own terms and with independence. Those are attractive qualities. I'd simply like to casually share these present times with you, if I may. The future can evolve at its own pace. O.K?"

Anne, who had quietly studied him while he spoke, underwent a flurry of mixed feelings. She had been praised but also informed – and even instructed – in how to accept their relationship. The ultimate feeling was that of relief. She liked his use of the word 'casually.' It relieved her of undue worries, allowing her to enjoy his friendship without fear or concern about premature advances, hastily formed commitments.

Producing a bright smile she declared, 'Thank you, Michael. You are a thoughtful man, which I appreciate.'

Across the room the publican, in a loud voice, called out, 'Last orders please. Last orders. Time to close-up.'

In a soft voice and with a grin Michael said, 'And I thought they always said, "Time gentlemen, please."

'Not down here,' Anne whispered. 'In London they still may.' As they both made their way out of the pub and crossed the road to the car, Michael asked her if she would be dining at home tonight or at the farm.

‘Martha put my prepared meal in the ‘frig this morning,’ Anne replied, ‘I did dine there last night. They have a new boarder they wanted me to meet. A teacher, who is here to hike and relax. ’

‘I do miss their cooking,’ Michael said. ‘Tonight I’m meeting two fellow artists, also visiting like me, so we’ll eat out. Otherwise – I might have asked to share your food!’ Anne turned to quickly look at him and he grinned. ‘I’m kidding.’

In an easy mood they drove back to Lady house. When he came around the car to open her door then helped her out he reached out his arms, taking both her hands in his. As he bent to lightly bestow a kiss on them he said, ‘Thank you, Anne. This was a great day. Mekri avrio kala kyria – which means, until tomorrow, fair lady.’

She watched him drive off and as she slowly entered the house a little smile of bemusement lit her face. With a thoughtful air she considered the fact that this Michael Tollander was proving to be quite an intriguing gentleman.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Stella Carmarthy greeted Anne and Michael at the front door with a smile of welcome. As she led them down the hall of the modern two-storey house she made the forthright declaration: 'All that we have yet is preliminary, just a beginning. There's lots more to be done. But Lady House, and its past, is already proving itself a fascinating study.'

As she ushered them into the front living room, Beryl, who was talking to another woman, hailed them, 'Hello! So glad you could join us too Mr. Tollander, the more input the better. And this is Mavis Trent, who handles records and research for our archaeological society and often teams-up with Stella.'

During introductions Michael insisted his first name be used. And Stella, with an airy wave of her hand agreed they should all be on a comfortable first-name basis because, 'We will all get to know each other quite well in the coming months!'

Beryl crossed the room to where a side table held a silver tray and a coffee set, to offer some to Anne and Michael, which they gladly accepted.

Anne was interested to discern the two sisters shared recognizably familial features, except that Stella's hair was brown, not black like Beryl's, and her eyes a hazel color rather than uniquely dark blue-black. Both of them displayed a similar confidence and intelligence. Mavis Trent seemed a pleasant woman, in her late thirties, early forties, as were Stella and Beryl.

Losing no time in getting down to the business at hand Stella picked up a sheaf of papers and suggested everyone find a seat. 'We know that both the Laity Farm and Lady House itself lie within an ancient village or hamlet, once called Tremara. Hence the name of the lane that leads-in off the road. And Tremara is recorded in the Domesday Book. Mavis? She is the expert here.'

Mavis, though short and slight in appearance, had a deep, well modulated voice. She said, 'The Domesday record, as such, was not as important for landholdings in Cornwall as it was for other areas of England.' She paused to smile at everyone, 'We were always remote and also poorer it seems. But historically it provides an important marker for continuous habitation and for names. In South West Cornwall, or Penwith – which is called Connerton in Domesday – there are scant listings. Rather surprisingly, Tremara is one of them. By this we know, or believe at least, Tremara, and the surrounding areas, were inhabited for a far longer time

than 1086, when the *Exon Domesday* was compiled.' Mavis coughed and reached for her coffee cup before continuing.

'Archaeologically, of course, we are more interested in exploring much further back in time. We have cromlechs, fogous, cliff castles, forts, et al, dating from the Iron Age, or 1000 BC, and the Bronze Age, about 2,000 BC. In fact, the Trencrom Hill fort, quite near Tremara, is Neolithic, from perhaps around 3000 BC.'

Mavis now looked across to Stella who took up the informal lesson from there. 'Thank you, Mavis, for that background. Now let's move closer to the present. The current building, now known as Lady House, was built in 1820, in the Georgian Style, by one, Sir Charles Magellan, on a site that contained an existing dwelling. He seems to have made his money in seafaring and commerce, not mining.' She paused to look across at Anne.

'This mayl sound a bit nosy and intrusive, Anne. But deeds of property are public records, of course. The farther back we move it gets tricky finding them, or they are lost. I just want to assure you it's for a definite reason, not idle curiosity.'

Anne nodded. 'That's understood, Stella. It was Beryl's idea after she visited Lady House. I trust her judgment and decision. And I think my aunt will to, when she is told, later on.'

Beryl interjected a comment. 'It helps to remember what Evan Powys, a Welsh poet, once wrote, "The shelter we inhabit is but a temporary abode for our time on earth. Learn from it, love it, then leave it, as others before us did."

Stella chuckled. 'Now Beryl, don't get all philosophic on us.' 'Let me proceed before we retrace our steps,' Stella continued. 'Magellan's heirs remained owners until 1910, or ninety years. It was bought by Richard Treverne, who had copper mining interests. Within five years it was sold to James Smythe, a maker of fine cabinetware from London. Three years later it passed to a Gilbert Pendall, a merchant from Penzance. In 1918, at the end of WWI, the penultimate owner of Lady House was a Captain John Waverley. His family, his heirs, held it until 1936, when Lady House was purchased by Miles Standish, a London businessman, for Isabelle Vincula Stratton.'

Anne bent her head momentarily, then quickly looked up directly into Stella's eyes. In an even and firm voice she stated. 'My aunt was a director on the board of Charme for many years, the London cosmetic house owned by the Standish family.'

Stella nodded. 'A fine achievement, especially for the times. Her brother was talented too. She's Cornish-born, as you are, Beryl tells me? We're always proud to know we Cornish are equal to any in England for brains and ability.' She paused to smile and slowly everyone else in the room did too.

On the sofa beside her Michael was aware of Anne's discomfiture but could only adjust his position on the seat and lean back; he could not touch her or say anything. Beryl looked across at Anne with a gentle expression.

'Now then,' Stella began. 'The essential purpose of our inquiries are the rumors and quasi-myths that Lady House has acquired over time. First of all, it's name.'

'When Charles Magellan built the current house it was called Tremara. It was occupied solely by his son's widow, Clara Magellan, for many years before she died. Sometime later it was sold to Richard Treverne and in 1910 it became known as Lady House. And on all the deeds that is the name that has endured up to the present. Now I think that Beryl should take over from here.'

Beryl stood up, crossed the room to deposit her coffee cup onto the side table, before returning to the chair she occupied. 'The fact that Lady House has always been occupied primarily by women is interesting. If for

no other reason than . . . the men who were its owners only lived there a brief while. All seemed to have died, and/or disappeared at an early age. Captain John Waverley may have simply taken to sea for distant parts: no record of his death or burial are on record. So it is quite understandable the name of Lady House persisted, and also that a superstition would accrue.'

Michael suddenly sat up and said: 'Surely it is reasonable to suppose that here, as in other parts of the world, men didn't usually live as long as ladies. Men were the risk-takers, adventurers, workers, and principal bread-winners.'

'Good for you, Michael!' Beryl exclaimed. 'I knew your reasoned input would be an asset. What you say is true. Yet it is the later years when superstitions gain a little credence. Incidentally, before I go on, would anyone like to visit the bathroom? I know I would.'

Stella jumped up and indicated where two bathrooms were located. As Anne slowly got to her feet Beryl walked over and took her arm, 'Come on. We'll go first.' As they entered the hall, Beryl quietly said, 'I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, Anne, but the next part is both fascinating and unsettling. Promise?'

Anne shook her head. 'In for a penny, in for a pound, I suppose. I may not like it – but I have to accept it. And I did say I wanted to know.'

‘Good girl. That’s why I quoted Evan Powys’ words. Just think of it all as solving a mystery – the Mystery of the Cornish House.’

Everyone reassembled themselves after several minutes and Beryl began speaking again. This time she held a sheet of foolscap in her hand.

‘Isabel Stratton did not occupy Lady House during the war years, it remained empty, cared for by the Laity’s on the nearby farm. For thirty years after that it was rented out to permanent residents. But in 1977 she did spend summers here, and over those years made modernizations with a view perhaps to making it her permanent home some day.’

Beryl paused a moment. ‘It is in 1948 that the first of several strange occurrences, or really unfortunate accidents began.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Stella interrupted her sister before she could go on, to say she wanted to bring in some prepared sandwiches and wine from the kitchen. ‘It is not lunch, just a little snack before you continue, dear. A small pick-me-up’

Michael promptly rose to suggest he assist. When they were in the kitchen, Stella said, ‘I’ve heard you Americans have something grand called a Brunch. This is just an ‘Elevenes’ to carry us through until a proper lunch. Would you like a beer, incidentally?’

‘Whatever you want to call it, it looks great to me. And no, a glass of wine would be good.’ Michael responded as he carried out the tray of thin, crustless sandwiches cut into triangles: neatly arranged lines of ham, cheese, and crab on white and brown bread, interspersed with slices of sweet melon.

After Stella brought in the white wine and glasses, he deftly opened the bottle for her and poured it into the glasses.

While they had been absent Mavis Trent told Anne that the larger library in Truro was the source for some of the old newspaper stories for much of the later information collected. ‘The research isn’t too difficult once you can obtain names and dates for what you are seeking.’

All of them collected a plate and a glass and a napkin and the atmosphere was relaxed and impersonal while they ate. This pause was welcome, Anne thought. Beryl's jaunty comment, about the Mystery of the Cornish House, stayed on her mind. Personally caught up in all this she now entertained doubts; particularly about invading her aunt's past along with her territory. Her own stay at Lady House had been serene and satisfying, and she did not want anything to jar that.

Once they had all finished eating Beryl promptly began again. 'In 1948 a lady from London rented Lady House for two years: unmarried, middle-aged, recently retired from the Civil Service. In September of 1949 a gentleman appeared on the scene, locally believed to be a relative. Both of them were often seen walking the beaches and the countryside, in the following months. In early December an ambulance arrived at Lady House followed by the police. It seems the gentleman – I'll just keep to details, no names – had fallen down some stairs, broken his neck, was pronounced dead on arrival at General Hospital. The inquest deemed it an accidental death, to a distant cousin of the lady renter. She stayed on at Lady House. Then, six months before her lease ended, she left.'

With a brief glance all around Beryl folded the papers in her hand.

‘I’ll condense Mavis and Stella’s other findings without excessive detail.

Over the next twenty-seven years there were five renters of Lady House and all were women. Of those, three received masculine visitors that stayed for a while: an ex-husband, a brother, and a son. One died of a heart attack and two from accidents that resulted in death. All occurred while at Lady House’

Beryl moved back to her chair and sat down. ‘It really isn’t too hard to see how superstition arose. I think it might occur almost anywhere. So we must now consider an obvious fact. For more than one-hundred-and-eighty years, ever since it was built, Lady House sheltered many women. Supposedly not one met an untimely end. With men . . . it seems otherwise. A curious circumstance. No more, no less than that so far.’

For a few minutes there was a weighty silence in the room. It was Michael who abruptly broke it. ‘Thanks Beryl! I don’t think I shall be asking to stay there now.’

The laughter that erupted from everyone provided a release from the accumulated tension that had followed her remarks. Anne looked at him with a grateful smile.

Stella got up to say, in a bright voice, ‘So that’s all of the research to date, my friends. What Mavis and I are involved with, of course, is the ancient background of this whole area. The archaeology of St. Ives, Hayle, and Lelant is our principle field of research for the Cornwall Society. Anything else we may come upon for the Tremara area we’ll pass along. And Beryl is the one who will now pursue – whatever mystical other things she chooses to pursue.’

Everyone got up in preparation to leave. Anne thanked Stella and Mavis too, for their hospitality and their research. Beryl exchanged a hug with her sister and Michael followed Anne to the door with Beryl alongside.

Outside on the pavement in front of the house the three of them stood for a few moments, to look out at the golden sands and the blue sea, and breathing in the salty air off the Atlantic with appreciation.

Then Beryl said, ‘What I think we three should do now is let all of what we’ve heard settle for a bit. I’ve had a sense of something that is more ancient, a quite different pursuit we can do over the next little while. That is, if you are still interested and willing?’

‘How could we stop now?’ Michael replied. ‘You’ve pulled the cork off the bottle. We can’t wait for the genie to appear. Right, Anne?’

'I suppose so,' Anne said slowly. 'But what began as a vague hint of a benign spirit a short time ago, we seem to have revealed an element of something that is . . . almost sinister.'

'No, no,' replied Beryl, 'Not sinister. That only lies in the realm of fantasy and fiction, or a crazy mind. There is a truth buried here, and if uncovered, it will prove to have a reason. Let's just wait and see.'

With genial farewells they parted, Beryl to her car, and Michael followed Anne to her one.

'Don't suppose you want to go to lunch, do you?' Michael inquired. She shook her head. 'No thanks. I'm still full from those snacks. Anyway I just want to collect my thoughts now and take it easy this afternoon.'

'Alright. Good idea. I'll follow you in my car up to the lane. Then I'm off to do some sketching inside the church in St. Ives.'

As they both stopped at the old gateway Michael got out and walked toward Anne's car. She lowered her window and he said, 'Well I at least feel quite relaxed now about you living alone in this house.' His glance swept down toward the attractive old grey stone façade of the two stories of Lady House with an appreciative look in his eyes.

'Why is that?'

‘With its long and dubious reputation around these parts, you’re unlikely to suffer any break-ins from masculine miscreants, I’d say.’

‘Oh Michael!’ Anne reached out and gave him a light punch on the shoulder. Smiling she waved goodbye and continued down the drive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

On his drive back to St. Ives, Michael was so deeply engaged in his thoughts that he almost drove past the church of St.Ia, halfway along the Harbour. There was a satisfying sense of achievement that Anne was now more relaxed around him. More willing to talk, to share some of her feelings; even her recent friendship with the remarkable Beryl; a personable woman who displayed a keen intelligence, he thought.

There was also a faint needling concern, about the house and its history. He wondered what strange meaning might be revealed later, and how it might affect Anne. Beryl's intuition that the key lay in the very distant past could be true. He was not about to argue with the extra-sensory-perception of a psychically inclined Celt. He just did not want Anne's new-found confidence to be changed. The reason he had acted very carefully on their recent meetings.

Pulling into a parking space across the road from the church he turned off the engine to sit and ponder for a while. During the past fourteen years,

since his divorce from the elegant but self-involved Estella, he had not lacked for female liaisons. A few he still remained in contact with on an infrequent basis. Yet not once had he considered, desired, or needed, any permanent relationship. Until now, when he found he not only eagerly anticipated the next meeting but even looked ahead to the next months, the next year. He desired to show Anne his own house, his way of life at home in Rhode Island. And he truly wanted to show her Greece. It seemed quite possible to envision the future the same way they shared the present.

When he first saw her climb over that wall in jeans and sweatshirt, with wind-tousled blond hair, and an almost accusatory expression in her grey-blue eyes, he was instantly attracted. There was a woman not only physically lovely but with refreshing purpose. Inner character suffused her outer beauty.

Later, at the Tate gathering, he had the chance to study her a little more. She dressed simply and well, with discreet but fashionable sureness. Her rejection of normal masculine association was challenging. And then there was that faint element of vulnerability, which always makes a man want to reach out and . . . protect.

There was no question he would pursue getting to know her well.

With a small sigh he looked across at the church tower, 80 feet of golden granite, then reached across for his sketching pad and crayons, and exited the car to make his way into the small church.

He had briefly read-up on the St. Ia legend, and acknowledged again how much Cornwall intrigued him. It really did keep invoking Greece to him, in a way he could not quite define.

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As Anne entered the house the scent of lavender was in the air again. Martha had been polishing. Walking directly to the stairs first, to change and deposit her handbag in her bedroom, she paused at the middle landing for a moment. The air was cooler today, the sun fitfully obscured by clouds, so the effect of light from the window was not strong.

Half turning she cast a glance downwards and thought about what she had learned this morning. Someone had fallen: a man had broken his neck. Within the protective confines of Lady House, once called Tremara, it was strange, even unnatural, to consider several other men had died here.

Continuing slowly up the shorter flight to the upper level she wondered how Aunt Vinnie had viewed these events when they happened. She felt the urge to visit Vinnie's bedroom and look again at that old group photograph.

The faces, all with their carefree smiles, were of another age; those happy years before the war. Now she wondered who among them had stayed at this house on those visits. Anne was unable to resist tallying-up those no longer alive. Miles Standish, he must have stayed here, but he died elsewhere, in the war. Her father Paul Martin, had died in a road crash in France. Her uncle Edward Stratton died much later. All three were random victims; of a war, an accident, and age. The other couple, unknown to her, caused her wonder if the man still survived.

Curiously just the one she always knew as 'Uncle Don,' Donald Phagen, was still alive. But did he actually ever stay at Lady House? Only Vinnie knew that. With a troubled sigh she left the room to go to her own bedroom.

Later, downstairs in the kitchen, after she bent to inhale the scent of the fresh roses in the jug on the sideboard that Martha had left, she looked at the old door that led to the basement. She thought of the Border Collie, Millybegs, determined to deliver her pups as near to the house as possible, and close to that old basement. Of young Josh, who would not step inside to have the tea she offered him. Superstition can take a powerful hold on people. Yet it could all be coincidence. Although Beryl had put little credence in that word.

Heating the kettle to make tea she decided to shrug it all off for the moment. With the ongoing research, and the arrival of Vinnie, there would be lots to discuss and explore later. Right now she was determined to maintain her present outlook of contented retreat. Every one of her days here had been happy ones and she was at last more positive about herself. This was but a temporary interlude in her life. Later she would leave. Not yet though. She really did want to stay a while longer.

Sipping her tea her thoughts turned to Michael Tollander. And the memory of his welcome attempt at humor after Beryl's report brought a smile to her face. She had to admit, she was glad to have had his companionship and supportive attitude today. Initially unwilling to entertain any thought of a man in her life, even peripherally, this American artist, this visitor to Cornwall, had become . . . a casual friend. He had wisely maintained a respectful distance, did not try to impress her about himself, nor be overly familiar. And eventually he too would leave, to return to Rhode Island, she to Connecticut. They were simply sharing a small orbit of time in this ancient and lovely land.

The ring of the telephone interrupted her musings.

To the right of the altar with its reredos of alabaster was a beautifully carved wooden statue of St. Ia. Michael studied it with interest. Though the polished wood was obviously old the actual work was relatively recent, in the timescale of the original church.

He made a brief sketch of the sweetly serene face with its head covering and an upright staff in one hand. Yet his mind tossed around the name of the saint, the tale of the young missionary floating across the Celtic Sea from Ireland in the 4th or 5th century. The pamphlet about her he had collected when he entered the church gave three different spellings of her name, Ia, Hya, and Eia. The last one interesting; three vowels together this way was so common in the Greek language too.

After making a few more sketches, of the 15th century choir stalls with their carved wood panels of human figures, and the bench ends of the pews, he was ready to leave. But not before he slowly walked down the south aisle, the Trenwith Aisle, which led to . . . Lady Chapel. While he was sure there was no association it did make him think of Lady House, then again of Anne. He hoped she was not disturbed by the details of the deaths that had occurred there. When Isabelle Stratton arrived there would be lots of questions, from several people, perhaps he among them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nancy Stonegate's voice was a distraction to Anne's musings and instantly brought the anticipation of an outing on the River Fal. It would another get-together, with a pleasant couple, and also Michael. The change in locale and scenery was another welcome uplift.

'Anne my dear, I hope I'm not calling at an inconvenient time. Just want to advise that Alan and I will collect you from Lady House in our car on Sunday morning. Does 7 o'clock sound too ungodly an hour?'

'No, Nancy, not at all. But are you sure? I could easily drive over to Mylor Harbour. I'm using Vinnie's car a lot now.'

'I'm sure you could.' Nancy replied. 'But you see the parking spaces are fairly tight over there, especially on weekends, so we thought we'd pick-up Michael Tollander first, then collect you.'

‘All right. The food will be packed and ready to go. The Laity’s are seeing to most of it. I’ll bring some milk but I just need to know what you think would be good in the way of wine, or beer, etc.’

‘Don’t worry about that, Anne. Alan keeps tea and coffee on board and we shall be bringing a few bottles with us. We shall also be tying-up at St. Mawes, I imagine, so will visit the pub there.’

‘It sounds like fun. And I shall be up and ready to go early.’

‘Oh, by the way,’ Nancy continued, ‘What do you hear from your aunt? Anything more about when she will be coming down?’

Anne laughed, ‘Yes, in one more week. She’s arriving next Thursday, in fact.’

‘Wonderful! We can’t wait to welcome her back. I imagine you are glad too. All right my dear, we’ll see you Sunday morning.’

After Nancy had rung off Anne stood where she was for a moment after replacing the receiver in its cradle on the dresser. Nancy’s intimation that she too would be glad of Vinnie’s return to the house caused her to reflect how swiftly the time had passed. There was just one more week to spend here alone. That lonely solitude she had at first envisioned had not happened. It had all been easy and pleasant, even full of events. And now, quite soon, it would end.

Was she glad? Of course. Her much-loved aunt had always been her best companion. And all of the wonderings and questions could now be related, and be met with understanding and undoubtedly some humor. Yet she must not deluge her with it all right away. Let Vinnie settle in again before the subject of Lady House and its past was raised.

Though she was eager to introduce Beryl to her as soon as possible, convinced the two would get along. Even Michael had been charmed, despite the vague fey-ness Beryl carried like an aura. Perhaps they could all explore that basement together, discuss the presence of a spirit, the numen. Interesting times lay ahead.

With a quick mental shrug she walked over to the kitchen door and stepped out into the walled garden, her favorite place to be when not inside. Everything flourished within the shelter of the grey granite walls, the rose bushes all blooming and still heavily budded. The apple trees, the fruit bushes, the rows of vegetables, looked so neat and well cared for. Young Josh did an excellent job of keeping it up.

Like the house it was an old garden that seemed to have perpetuated into modern times. What year was it the house had been built, 1820? So the garden walls were from about the same time she supposed.

A detail Stella had noted this morning remained with Anne: that this house had been built over an existing one. She wondered how long that earlier one had remained. Hardly from the times of the Domesday record. Even though in Cornwall there still existed a few really old buildings. Over the span of nine hundred years there may have been several structures here. And even before that there would have been human habitation in this area. That had already been determined in several spots not too far away.

Anne was newly made aware she stood within a truly ancient land, with a past that stretched back to the dawn of history. She thought about the Bronze Age walls she and Michael had seen in Zennor. So how and when did a *numen* arise, and why? Would such a thing always persist?

It was a strange and unfathomable concept which might never be properly answered. Beryl's concept that she should simply regard it as a mystery to explore was sound, if only a kind attempt to soothe her doubts: the Mystery of the Cornish House. And while Lady House could indeed be her own someday, it still belonged to her aunt. In the brief time she had stayed here she felt possessive at first, then comforted, but also protected. Now that some peculiar past occurrences were revealed it really did not alter her original feelings.

The house in Connecticut, her own personal home which she liked too still waited her return. But that was a modern house, probably built no more than thirty years ago, so with no distinctive past. And with no protective numen either, or the break-up of her marriage would not have happened, she ruefully thought. When she returned to it she wondered if she would regard it in the same way, whether she would feel 'at home' in it again. Oh well, if not, then she could sell it and find another shelter somewhere else.

Aware she was trying to emotionally distance herself now from Lady House she half smiled. Then turning to look at this charming yet puzzling old house, she studied the lovely granite walls, the roofline, the windows, and lastly the curved stone enclosure, with the concealed steps, that once led into the basement.

The thought came to her swiftly with an immediate and instinctive surety. Down there lay the key to it all. Somewhere within that cellar, deep below the surface was the origin, the source of the mystery. She was sure Beryl had sensed this. Her aunt must know it too. Why else would she have preserved and decoratively retained the old door, and the key, to a cellar that was always unused.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Early morning sunlight glinted off the Fal River, herring gulls screeched and circled around the many sailing craft moored at wooden finger-berths stretching out from Mylor Harbor.

‘A perfect sailing day!’ Angus announced.

Standing on the historic small naval quay in front of the HMS Ganges Restaurant, carriers of food and drink beside them, Nancy, Angus, Michael and Anne, gazed out across the Carrick Roads. The undulating green of the Roseland Peninsula defined the farther shore of the broad Falmouth estuary.

‘The tide’s at the full now so we’ll head upriver first, leeward side, then tack across and return windward side.’ Angus continued. ‘Then we can swing down to St. Mawes.’

A short walk led to where La Donna Lex, a 30ft Westerly, was moored. When they stepped aboard, Anne followed Nancy below deck to help store the supplies. Emerging again they stood by as Michael assisted Angus with raising the mainsail and attaching the jib.

‘You must enjoy your chosen profession, Angus,’ Anne called out, after the sails were adjusted, ‘To have named your boat as you did.’

‘As you know, boats are usually given a feminine name.’ Angus called back. ‘But Nance positively refused to let me call it The Lady Nancy. Since she is the ultimate law of my life – hence The Lady Law it was.’

‘That’s a lot of malarkey!’ Nancy said with a laugh. ‘Angus always does precisely what he wants to do. Well – I do too – so we’re a perfect match in that regard.’

Angus started the engine to test it was in working order, then after a minute or two switched it off again. ‘Michael, you take the tiller, I’ll loose the fore line, and you Nancy the aft line. You and Anne coil the lines. And once we’re clear of the harbor both of you can bring in the bumpers.’

As the boat gracefully slipped off its berth, Angus moved over to the starboard winch of the jib, and he and Michael eased La Donna Lex out into the Carrick roads and turned upriver.

By late afternoon they had moored off St. Mawes where they enjoyed getting off for a while to walk up to the 16th Century St. Mawes Castle, to look across the estuary at its fellow, Pendennis Castle, on the headland above Falmouth.

Michael and Anne leaned their arms on a wall, a little separated just then from Nancy and Angus. ‘Did you have fun?’ Michael asked her. ‘I sure did.’

‘Yes! This was such a lovely day. Even I, a native here, was impressed by how scenic it was from the river . . . Restronguet, Feock, Treliwick, the King Harry Passage.’

‘You’re a pretty good sailor, Anne. You handled your turn at the helm well. And the food worked out well, didn’t it?’

‘It did! Funny how open water makes you super hungry. The only bit I found tricky were those blow-downs by the wind going up river first thing this morning.’

‘Yes, but it didn’t last long. It’s rather fun to try and anticipate the gusts then try to steer across.’ Michael looked at her with a smile. ‘We both acquired a bit of color today.’

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It was still light that evening by the time they had secured La Donna Lex to the mooring back in Mylor, and Angus and Nancy declared they must all eat dinner at the Ganges before driving home.

‘The two of you handled yourselves well today,’ Alan declared as he raised a wine glass, ‘In a few weeks we shall consider a longer trip – perhaps to the Scilly Isles.’

Seated together at a table near the windows Anne looked around the crowded restaurant. At all the tables people were talking, laughing, telling stories to each other. Alan was relating a humorous sailing incident of the past to them as they placed there dinner orders and sipped their wine.

It quietly dawned upon her that they too must look just like two familiar couples, who had shared a day together. It surprised and totally upended her initial quest of adjustment; to being a solitary woman now she was divorced.

How swiftly she had become quite casually involved with a stranger. How easily they were included to share this day with a long-married couple. And it all seemed so . . . perfectly natural in the ambience of the restaurant. As she reached for her wine with her right hand she glanced at her ring: how changed she had become, how comfortable and happy she felt right now.

Later, as Alan drove toward the entry to Lady House he noted the hall lights were lit. 'I see Martha is taking good care of you,' he remarked.

They all said their goodbyes and Alan told Michael to stay put, as he opened the car door to escort Anne up the steps. 'Incidentally Anne, I'd like to see you in the office next week. Just to talk about an update from the Connecticut law firm. O.K?'

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

That night Anne hit the pillow with a satisfied feeling of tiredness and exhilaration, from wind, sun, and the genial aftermath of the sailing trip. Wispy fragments of multiple dreams still hovered in her consciousness as she woke.

Something to do with Adam, her younger son; then her Connecticut house; then Michael, who held a painting he had made; then Beryl, who had been smoothing a dark cloth across something she could not see.

With a long luxurious stretch, aware of muscles exercised by yesterday's activities, she lay back and tried to focus on the shreds of images that grew ever fainter as they disappeared. With a sigh she looked at the window, noting an overcast sky this morning. Rain later perhaps. But it was a Sunday and nothing special planned.

Then the memory of Angus Stonegate's parting words to her last night came back: 'An update from the Connecticut law firm.' That could mean anything. Better she visit his office first thing Monday morning: after calling first, of course. She did not want to have to stress and wonder about it. Too few days were left before Vinnie arrived.

The thought of seeing her again, and right here at Lady House, brought a sense of content. What a lot they had to share with each other in the weeks ahead.

A glance at the clock on the bedside table showed she had slept longer than usual this morning. Best she rise now because Martha would be dropping by to bring fresh bread, before she went to church, and Anne did want to tell her how well the day had gone, and how much everyone had appreciated the food.

After a quick shower and donning some casual clothes she studied her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was now naturally brighter from the sun, and the start of a tan on her smooth complexion. She both looked and felt fit – and she was much happier with life than in a long time.

Martha laughed at Anne's report of where they had sailed and what they had seen. 'Jes' what ye needed, my girl. Out on the water and a bit o'fun with good friends. Does a heap o' good to the spirits, it do.'

'Do you think it will rain later, Martha?'

'O, I reckon maybe a bit before the afternoon. But in the 'frig there's a jot of stewed chicken for ye.'

Before Martha headed out the door Anne gave her a warm hug. 'You are such a treasure, you know.'

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After a breakfast of bacon and eggs, heartier than she usually made, she considered what she would do. Tidy-up around the garage and maybe wash the Mini? This would allow her to explore more closely what had once been the old stables and now just a larger extension to the garage. For some odd reason she had lately wondered if it might have once housed guests. For at the far end was a full bathroom. It was old-fashioned but functional, and even decorative. It could explain extra accommodations during those old house parties that were depicted in Vinnie's photograph.

The urge for some outdoor activity presented another option: a walk on the beach at Carbis Bay. In all the time spent here since arriving she had

yet to visit or actually walk on a beach. Today was ideal, if she took her hooded rainproof jacket in case it rained.

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The clouds gave way to sunshine by the time she turned to retrace her steps along the golden sands at the edge of the waves. In earlier years, she recalled, she and Vinnie always stayed at a particular hotel overlooking this beach. Many holiday afternoons she had spent sunbathing on this beach. Though the town had grown a lot since then the beach was not changed.

As Anne mounted the steps to leave a woman, walking from the opposite direction, caught up to her. She suddenly recognized the farm's latest paying guest. What the blazes was her name again, Alice something?

‘Well! We can head back together now. Wish I’d known you were down here, I could have used some company.’ Alice Blaine promptly fell into step beside her. Anne would much prefer to complete her walk solo, but there was little she could do without appearing rude.

Back on the road, as they were passing some shops before heading inland, she heard her name called. Turning in surprise she saw Stella Camarthy, with a teenage girl beside her, and bags of shopping in their hands.

‘Hello, Anne, this is my daughter Carol. We decided to stock the larder before the week ahead.’

Anne shook the extended hand of the smiling young woman who might have been sixteen, seventeen. She then felt obligated to at least introduce Alice.

‘I’ve just been for a walk on the beach. I ran into this lady who is staying at the farm.’ Anne said. ‘Alice – ‘

‘Blaine,’ said her companion in a firm voice. ‘And I hope you are studying hard for your A-levels young lady. You’ll certainly need to, living down here.’

‘I’ve already passed them,’ Carol replied softly with a smile still in place. Anne raised her eyes toward Stella with a look of chagrin.

Stella continued, ‘I only interrupted your progress to say that Mavis found another interesting record. Beryl said she’d call you soon.’

‘Thanks Stella. Have a lovely evening.’

Anne moved away in a determined fashion, aware that her companion would have loitered in curiosity.

They had crossed the main road and reached the start of the lane before Alice stated, ‘For someone who was away so long you seem to know

a lot of people, and I heard you went sailing yesterday. I suppose you have to be Cornish for that. I find them a rather clannish lot.'

After a pause, Anne replied, 'Do you really? I find them a friendly people. Stella is the sister of a friend I recently met.'

'Well I've been here a whole week and have yet to have a decent conversation with someone.'

'Did you manage to visit The Tate?' Anne deflected in an even voice.

'Oh yes. Lovely building, lots of art, but not many people to socialize with. Even a pub I went to I was left pretty much alone.'

'I'm sorry. How long are you staying?'

'Driving back tomorrow; and apart from the scenery and the sun I'll be glad to get back to civilization.'

They had reached the turn-in of the hedge that led to Lady House and as Anne turned to bid goodbye to this critical and rather off-putting woman, she suddenly asked the one thing Anne had feared.

'Look, couldn't I have a quick tour inside of Lady House since I'm here now?'

Anne stood for a moment in silence then looked at her watch and said, 'Well I do have plans, but – perhaps a very brief look.'

As they walked down the driveway Alice Blaine commented on the fact the drive could use more gravel and the missing trees should have been replaced. ‘But that house probably requires a lot of upkeep too.’

In silence Anne opened the front door and stepped inside to let Alice Blaine follow her. Deciding she would firmly ignore any negativity from her unwanted visitor she would try to hustle her out as soon as she could.

Perhaps if they did the upstairs first she might move her out faster. ‘Let’s climb the stairs and do the upper part first,’ she said. Alice Blaine looked around the hallway then slowly followed up the staircase. ‘Lots of wood to keep polished and clean, so it’s nice you have help.’

The two back bedrooms were shown first, then Anne’s room, and with much reluctance she opened the door to Vinnie’s room.

‘What strong colors for a bedroom,’ Alice said preparing to step inside, ‘And that wall of photographs! Rather a sad memorial to the past.’ Anne reached out to arrest the woman’s progress into the room, saying, ‘We’d better hurry. Let’s do the downstairs now.’

Walking down the staircase Anne was tempted to mention the house was 200 years old then decided the fewer facts the better. Ushering Alice first into the front rooms, then the lounge at the back, she finally, and quite reluctantly, led her into the kitchen.

‘Now this is quite charming! Amazing what a bit of money will do for old houses. Your aunt must have spent a fortune on it all.’

Anne quickly moved to the back door, ‘You must see the walled garden. It’s quite special. And there’s a gate where you can rejoin the lane to the farm.’

But Alice had stopped and was staring at the old cellar door. ‘Well, what’s down there? Probably used as a wine cellar today?’

‘No, no, just an old cellar that’s no longer used.’

‘Oh but I *must* try that key.’ And with that she plucked the old key from the hook and was about to fit it into the lock.

Anne thrust out her hand. ‘Please don’t! It’s there strictly for decoration.’ As she firmly folded her hand over the key Alice reluctantly let it go. She opened the back door still holding it. ‘Come see the garden.’

‘Aren’t you afraid that a house this old could be haunted?’ Alice said in a taunting voice. ‘It’s so remote too. I wouldn’t want to stay here alone.’

Anne fought to produce a pleasant smile as she said, ‘On the contrary, it is blessed not haunted. By an ancient Cornish goddess who protects women. That’s why it’s called Lady House you know.’

Alice Blaine’s face had adopted a scornful air as Anne maneuvered her into the garden. With vague arm gestures she indicated the shrubs and

trees and commented how Cornish walled gardens were such an asset with the Atlantic winds. Miss Blaine merely stood where she was and looked at it without displaying much interest, so Anne lost no time in moving across to the gate, which she opened.

‘Well . . . if you’re in such a hurry I suppose I’ll get back to the farm.’ Alice muttered. ‘Thanks for letting me see it at least. Pity you couldn’t manage a cup of tea after all that walking.’

‘Sorry.’ said Anne, ‘I’ve lots to do. Have a safe trip back tomorrow.’

After shutting the gate she turned and walked swiftly back towards the kitchen. Closing the door she leaned against it in relief and quietly intoned, ‘What a woman! It’s not surprising she lacks making friends with that attitude. I bet the Laity’s will be glad to see her go.’

Still leaning back Anne looked down at the key, still in her hand. It felt smooth and warm to her touch. As she held it she suddenly recalled the dream of it being passed to her. A strange feeling of solace stole over her, also a strength, which spread from her hand all the way up her arm as if by an injection of liquid warmth.

Carefully transferring it to her other hand she slowly replaced it on the hook. As she did so a mischievous smile lit her face. ‘Well, dear numen, you’ve now acquired a goddess factor. And now that we’ve *both* managed

to get rid of her, I think a glass of wine is called for, to celebrate. Then later I'll re-heat the stewed chicken.'

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Angus Stonegate's secretary had set the appointment with him for 9:30 a.m. After friendly pleasantries about the sailing trip and the dinner on Saturday evening, Anne sat across from his desk and waited to hear his news.

Opening a folder Angus said. 'It appears to me that your soon-to-be ex-husband, Alan Fellowes, has lately persuaded his attorneys to try to redraft the original agreement somewhat.'

Anne immediately burst out, 'It's about the house, isn't it? My younger son called me recently to suggest I mortgage it and loan the company some money. But surely that isn't legal.'

‘My dear,’ Angus replied with a laugh, ‘Anything is legal if the parties involved agree to it. But you are fortunate in that Connecticut is not a community property state.’

‘Which means?’ Anne asked, her expression serious.

‘It means, you don’t have to agree on this transfer of the house for equivalent value of company stocks and shares. That is essentially what is now being asked. He can make no claim upon the house.’

‘But surely the original agreement is firm now that I have signed. He brought the divorce suit. I agreed to it and accepted I would not receive anything else but the house.’

Angus sighed. ‘I know, I know. And, if I may say so, it was more than fair. Yet . . . I’d like to know how much the house is valued at today.’

Anne thought for a moment. ‘In today’s real estate market I’m not sure. It’s a nice four-bedroomed, one-story home, in a good neighborhood.’

‘You can estimate perhaps by the amount of property taxes you paid last year. That is the usual indicator; and it changes as value goes either up or down.’

‘Then I suppose it would be worth . . . about \$385 to \$395,000?’

‘And do you have any idea,’ Angus continued, ‘Of what the value of Fellowtronic shares would be today?’

Anne looked at Angus with a taut smile. 'They've lost value lately with the recent problems. But the company was once worth about a million, million-and-a-half dollars. Today I simply don't know.'

'Hmm. No matter, I could easily find out. But presumably you still prefer to own your property there, rather than shares in the company, is that right?' Angus asked.

'Yes. Definitely. I've no wish to be associated with the company now in any way, not even to owning shares!' Anne stated firmly.

'Right!' said Angus, looking up at her with smile. 'Simple then. I shall contact the attorneys and say, sorry but no. This may delay things a bit but I gather you are in no special rush to conclude the divorce soon?'

'No-o, but within a reasonable time, of course. I just want to get it over with.' Anne replied. An unbidden thought flashed into her mind: was Angus wondering if she and Michael seemed more than friends? Then she quickly dismissed it. After all, it was the Stonegate's who had first introduced them.

Angus paused before continuing, 'The normal waiting period is about ninety days, or three months, from the 'Return Date.' That's the official start date of the action, which is . . . let's see, April 14th. Best to count on four months for conclusion I think.'

He then adopted a more serious tone, and folded his hands together on the desk as he looked at her. ‘Two things I need to discuss with you, Anne. First about the house. While leaving it for a brief time does not constitute ‘Legal Abandonment’ it would be a wise idea to return to it when you planned to. When is that? Three months? . . . end of July?’

Anne nodded her head again. ‘Yes. That’s right. And I do still plan to return then.’

‘Good. When I contact your ex-husband’s attorneys I shall assure them of that, so they will not influence their client toward the possibility. It’s obvious that raising money is his primary concern. And I shall also caution about the Automatic Restraining Order in effect in Connecticut. That is, the selling or the mortgaging of the property. This applies to you too. When you return to the house, you ought to stay for awhile. Until the divorce *is* final do not try to sell or mortgage it. Is that clear?’

Again Anne nodded and said, ‘Yes.’

‘Alright. Then the next question is, who would inherit this property if you met with a fatal accident?’ Angus half-smiled and raised his hand in

demurral. 'I know it sounds morbid and unlikely, but as your solicitor in this matter I also have to ask if you have made out a personal Will? I mean a new one, recently?'

Anne, taken by surprise, shook her head. 'No. I haven't. I quite forgot about that.'

'Most people do, unfortunately.'

'Alan and I had a joint Will, a Revocable Trust actually. Everything would have gone to our sons.'

Angus nodded. 'When I contact your ex-husband's attorneys I want to assure them you plan to return to Connecticut, and to the house. The question of the Will or the Trust will not be raised, of course. It is up to him to adjust his own Will. But my advice to you, right now, is to have a new personal Will drawn-up and soon. I have a number of reasons for suggesting this.'

Anne swallowed. 'Well . . . that shouldn't be too hard, should it? There is just the house and a few personal possessions and . . .'

Angus shook his head. 'No Anne. There is another consideration. Especially as the subject of money has become a larger consideration over there. You are your aunt's direct heir: to her properties and to some considerable financial inheritance. Along with Kendrick & Dobson, her

solicitors in London, I happen to know a lot about your aunt's affairs. I suggest I draft a Will for you right away, before your divorce is final. This will make your future assets separate and secure. You can always make changes to it in the future, of course. Is this agreeable to you?"

Anne stared at Angus with a thoughtful expression in her eyes. She nodded her head again. 'Yes. Yes, of course, if you think so.'

Getting up from the desk finally, Angus smiled at her as he closed the file before him. 'Right. My secretary will give you a call when we're ready for you to sign. And don't look so serious! Go out and enjoy the rest of the day. Before you have to leave Cornwall I want us all to have another sailing trip. Perhaps to the Scilly Isles this time.'

Anne got up and after a moment smiled back. 'That sounds lovely. You know . . . Michael Tollander told me he had rather hoped you would sail across the Channel and on to the Med.'

'Ha! Yes I'm sure he would like that. So would I. But I can't spare that amount of time right now.'

After farewells and a warm hug from Angus, Anne descended the stairs and walked outside into the little courtyard beside the offices. She stood beside the car for a moment, thinking. The recent news about the

house and the shares was troubling; along with the advice about the necessity of making a Will.

A few weeks ago the divorce had all seemed so cut-and-dried, and simple. She felt she was long over the emotional part of it. To now have to now think about petty wrangling again was distasteful. Too, the mention of her inheritance from her aunt, wasn't something she wanted to consider.

The hearty voice that suddenly hailed her came as a surprise. 'Hi there! Are you sueing me for bad helmsmanship on Sunday?'

Michael Tollander, with an envelope in his hands and a big smile, was striding towards her. 'St. Ives is certainly a small town, isn't it!'

As she looked across the courtyard Anne immediately felt a sense of relief . . . with a startling awareness she was actually happy to see him here.

'Well! What about you Michael Tollander? Is someone infringing upon your artistic license?'

Michael reached her side and with a laugh. 'Just dropping off some insurance papers for Angus to sign, on a shipment of paintings. He studied her face for a moment then said. 'Want to go and have a cup of coffee somewhere?'

Without hesitation she replied. 'Yes. Yes I would.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The aroma of hot milky coffee was comforting. Anne slowly stirred in brown sugar, head bowed over the large mug in quiet appreciation. The little café overlooking the harbour was quite full of customers, and this was also comforting. Yet Michael managed to find them a table for two by the window.

‘Don’t have any pennies left right now – will a sketch do?’

‘What?’ Anne said, looking up at him.

‘For your thoughts.’ Michael said, still smiling. ‘They look serious. But if you want to share them . . . that’s what friends are for. We are still friends, aren’t we?’

Anne slowly smiled. 'Yes. Of course. And thanks for the offer. But I don't want to spoil your Monday morning with all the tedious details of divorce tangles.'

'Ah ha.' Michael replied. 'Been there. Done that. I know Angus Stonegate is handling it all for you and he's a fine solicitor. Has something new cropped up?'

Anne briefly nodded. 'Alan wants me to trade the Connecticut house for stocks and shares in his company. It's always about money, of course! But I'm sticking to the original agreement.'

'Good! Just don't let it get you down because it is almost all behind you. You have a new life and new interests ahead of you. Remember, I speak from experience.'

'I suppose so.' Anne sighed. 'I shall be so relieved when it is finally over. Yet . . . I wonder how it will be when I return in July. That is when I start my new life. All this is just an interlude, a holiday.'

Michael was silent as he sipped his coffee, then he said. 'Not really, Anne. Your new life has already begun, right here, in Cornwall. You've even made new friends. They will remain a part of your future.'

Anne slowly produced a smile. 'Yes. But three thousand miles away from me.'

‘One of them won’t. Rhode Island is less than 100 miles from Westport.’

She laughed. ‘Thanks. You have been a good supportive friend.’

He looked at her, a more serious cast to his eyes. ‘Why are you using the past tense? I was planning to stay that way. If you’ll let me.’ Quickly he changed his expression to a grin. ‘Anyway, you and I are properly involved right now in exploring a mystery. Forget the future and concentrate on the here and now.’

Anne brightened. ‘Oh, I forgot to tell you. I met Stella yesterday while out walking. She said Beryl would be calling me soon because they’ve found something else.’

‘Ha! See? We have a lot of work ahead of us.’

Newly enthused Anne suddenly remembered to tell him about Angus’ suggestion of a possible sailing trip later to the Scilly Isles.

‘Wonderful.’ Michael was all smiles. ‘I certainly plan to visit them before I leave. One can fly there too, you know. Were you aware they were called the Cassiterides by the old Greeks? It means the Isles of Tin.’

‘Michael Tollander! You are a positive encyclopedia of knowledge. How did you learn that?’

His grin was complacent. ‘I know. I try. Once when I was in Crete, I heard this old tale of a high-born Cretan lady who sailed there with her lover. He eventually returned. But she didn’t.’ A long pause.

‘You mean that’s it? End of story? No reason given?’

‘Nope. No other details. It’s probably adapted from the Theseus and Ariadne story. Or a warning to Cretan women to stay at home. The reason I remembered it was an old word they used. *Potnia*, a Minoan word for Lady. So it is a very old story.’

Anne regarded him in affable silence for a moment. ‘Well, it’s just one more tale of a jilted woman. History is full of them.’

‘True. But how many end up in the Scilly Isles?’ Michael reached over to put her empty mug next to his before rising. ‘Hey! What do you say we drive up the coast? We could go to Padstow. There’s a fantastic fish restaurant there. You once said that’s where you were born. Have you ever been back?’

Anne shook her head. ‘No. Well, yes. But just once. My aunt took me back when I was about eleven, to see an old schoolmate. By then my real home was in London. And when we came back each year on holiday we always stayed in St. Ives.’

‘So why not? Lovely scenery – and we’re *both* on holiday remember?’

His artful persuasion almost made her laugh. ‘For an otherwise stable sort of individual, Michael, you have a penchant for spontaneous action. And it’s quite a long drive, you know.’

‘Less than an hour, I’ve already done it. More important, we’ve both reached that age – our fifties remember – when we *can* if we want. Free to have spur-of-the-moment adventures. Come on!’ With that he stood up and held the back of her chair.

As she too rose she thought how easy it was to accept his ideas, and enjoy them. Never would she have imagined she would be jaunting around Cornwall with a man, and one so recently met. Or ever have wanted to so soon after her break-up with Alan. Then in a sudden flash she recalled Beryl Penrose’s words on the train ride here. ‘Now you’re going back . . . now there is something . . . and someone . . .’

Her face held a faintly rueful smile as they left the restaurant. This whole sequence of extraordinary happenings had begun to take on an “Alice in Wonderland” quality. How different to everything in her past life.

‘Atta-girl!’ Michael pronounced, as he carefully noted her complacent expression, ‘Today is another installment of Our Travels Around Cornwall.

Think of all those future cocktail parties at home. We can bore everyone silly until they're glad to see us leave.'

He insisted on driving them, with the now familiar excuse his aged rental car needed its regular distance runs to keep functioning. So she dropped him back at his cottage then proceeded on to Lady House, where he would collect her. While she waited she wondered if she should change her outfit. Then decided the beige gabardine jacket and pants were fine for a good restaurant lunch but put her sneakers and a sweater into a canvas bag, and the mandatory waterproof jacket in case it rained later.

The doorbell rang as she descended the stairs. Escorting her to the car, Michael asked if Lady House's *numen* was still behaving agreeably. Anne happily related how yesterday she had upgraded her to goddess-status.

Initial qualms about what they would talk about during a longer- than-usual car journey disappeared as she launched into the tale of Sunday's intrusion by the totally disagreeable guest of the Laity's, and the incident of the key to the cellar. This then led to Beryl's stated desire to view the cellar, after her aunt arrived.

‘Ah yes. The cellar.’ Michael said. ‘Therein may lie the secret. It isn’t the house itself, it is the earth beneath. Just as the old temples of Greece are not particularly sacred, but the site that they occupy is.’

‘Is that true?’ Anne inquired.

‘Absolutely. All were constructed at special places. Those deemed agreeable to the gods, the heavens, and the mountains around.’

‘Hmm.’ Said Anne reflectively.

‘Think of Stonehenge. Everyone marvels at the stones and forgets the importance of the location for those who raised them. Our ancients were not only practical but reverential toward the land and the heavens. They seem to have known something we’ve forgotten.’

‘Ley lines – I’ve just remembered.’ Said Anne. ‘Alfred Watkins was a man who believed all England was linked, by ancient paths and roads.’

‘He did. I’ve read of him. Yet I don’t think the modern so-called Hippies, and their drug-induced fetishes, quite get the right message.’

As they continued to talk the scenic coastal vistas and villages streamed by; Porthtowan, St. Agnes, Perranporth. Then in what seemed like no time at all, Newquay and Watergate Bay were behind them, and they entered Padstow, descending a steep hill toward the ancient port.

Anne sat up straighter, looking about with keen interest. 'How surprising. Padstow seems to have changed less than St. Ives. The town at least looks much the same.'

'Where did you use to live?' Michael asked.

'Right up there, Brent Cottage on Mill Street.'

'Let's park the car and walk around before lunch. The Restaurant isn't far from here.'

A parking lot near the harbour overlooked the Camel Estuary. As they left the car Anne indicated the way behind them, up a hilly slope toward Mill Street. Partway along it she stopped in front of a two-story brick built cottage. To Michael, the expression in her eyes seemed to struggle for recall over the distance of the years.

To Anne there slowly came a few old, long-neglected memories of where she once happily lived and played, until her life and locale changed forever with the loss of her parents. But other memories surfaced too, something more immediate

Michael, standing behind her, pulled out his camera and she heard the faint sound of the click as he took a shot of the cottage. As she turned around to look at him he took another, this time of her.

‘I thought you might want this reminder, Anne. Memories are such valuable things. And I’d like a record of where the young *you* grew up. The cottage is charming – where a charming child once lived.’

He was totally unprepared for what happened next. Anne was turned away from him again, her head bent as her shoulders gently shook, and her hand scrambled inside her purse to find a tissue. He came forward, placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around, to find big tears slowly running down her cheeks, the collar of her blouse already splashed.

‘Anne! Darling? Forgive me, I didn’t mean to upset you.’ He pulled out a large white handkerchief which she grasped, then pushed him away. She started to walk back down the street as she mopped her eyes. Quickly following he took hold of her elbow.

‘It’s alright, it’s not what you think.’ Anne murmured. ‘Please – could we go somewhere quiet for a moment. I’d like to sit down.’

Reaching the corner at the end of the street he saw there was a wooden bench overlooking the harbour. ‘Here. Let’s sit here so you can scold me for being such a thoughtless clown.’ He said. ‘To see your old home again brought back all the old sadness too. I’m truly sorry.’

Finished wiping her eyes Anne stared straight ahead out to sea. She shook her head. ‘It wasn’t that at all – I was over that many years ago. And my life with Aunt Vinnie has been a full and happy one.’

After a pause, Michael cautiously ventured, ‘Then what . . . some other memory?’

Anne nodded, still staring out at the ocean. ‘Not a memory really; more the lack of one. It’s quite ridiculous to explain.’

‘Try me.’

Determined to recompose her demeanor she sat back and sighed. ‘It was something you said – and the way you said it. A reminder of . . . all the times Alan and I came back to England with the boys.’

‘Yes?’

‘We visited and often stayed with Vinnie in London. But we *always* visited his family in Birmingham, and then visited wherever his business contacts were, even as far south as Somerset.’

‘Yes?’

After another long pause, Anne continued. ‘Never once did he want to visit Cornwall. So often I would suggest how the boys might enjoy it.’

Michael reached his arm lightly across her shoulders but stayed silent.

Anne sighed again. 'When you said 'memories are valuable' and 'a record of where I grew up' it made me think . . . all those years when neither my husband nor sons ever wondered, ever really wanted to know. So this is all my ego, isn't it?'

Michael tightened his hold around her and leant across to gently kiss her cheek. 'It's ego alright – but your damned husband's ego!'

The silence lengthened until he said, 'Look, shall we go and eat?'

She shook her head. 'No . . . I don't know. I think I would rather just go home.'

'Alright. We'll skip the fish restaurant here. Do it another day. We shall drive back to St. Ives and have something to eat there.'

'Michael – I'm so sorry to have spoiled this trip for you.'

'But you didn't! I have learned something else about you, which is far more important. C'mon – we'll still be able to get something at Luigi's!'

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The return drive passed swiftly for Anne. Michael kept up a low-key commentary on famous Cornish landscape painters, the visits he had made to some of the sites they had graphically depicted. His calm voice soothed her thoughts, helped dismiss the memory of her tears for the vanished years. Gradually she refocused on the present, the here-and-now.

They had passed Camborne before she became fully aware that they had driven the inland route this time, were in fact on the more direct A30 south. This meant the turnoff to St. Ives was not far ahead.

‘That was a lot of driving for you, Michael – and without that great lunch you looked forward to. Just drop me off at Lady House please, then go and enjoy the rest of the day.’

‘Wouldn’t dream of it.’

‘Why not?’

‘When I invite a lady to lunch I expect to fulfill the invitation.’

‘But . . . I honestly don’t feel like going out to eat.’

‘Good! ‘I’ve a better suggestion. There’s a great Fish & Chip shop around the corner from the cottage. And I’ve wine and beer at home. So you can kick off your shoes, put your elbows on the table, dip your chips into the ketchup with greasy fingers. And relax.’

Despite herself Anne had to smile. ‘Do you mean . . . old-fashioned style Fish & Chips, all wrapped up with newspaper?’

‘Of course. – that’s our tablecloth, isn’t it?’

‘Michael, you . . . you make life a lot of fun. But I can manage for myself at home you know.’

‘I know that. I’m thinking of myself. I’d like company for lunch.’

In the small sun-filled kitchen at the rear of the cottage, seated across from Michael, with the pungent aroma of malt vinegar on fried fish, and a glass of white wine, Anne found her appetite return. She had rolled-up the sleeves of her silk blouse and did justice to the meal.

Sipping his beer Michael's eyes met hers. He smiled: 'We traded high-class cuisine for low-class fare; but locally caught fish is great either way. And Max over there will graciously dispose of any leftovers.'

The cat, that had followed them in when they arrived, blinked his eyes as he majestically lay along the windowsill, front paws neatly tucked beneath his considerable bulk.

'He looks as grand and aloof as the Sphinx,' murmured Anne, as she reached for another chip. 'I bet he was never cuddly, even as a kitten.'

'Doubt it. Sort of cat I think Beryl Penrose should own. Totally tuned in to her second sight.'

Anne sat up straight. 'Beryl! I have to call and tell her. And I forgot to tell you too. This morning, before I left, Martha said next Sunday there will be a special house party, a luncheon. When Vinnie returns she always has friends over the first Sunday she is back.'

'You mean – I'm invited to Lady House, at last?'

‘Yes. I’m to invite Beryl and her husband, and you. The Stonegate’s will be there. Some others too, according to Martha..’

‘I bet Mrs. Ethel Cartwright is coming. Solid patron of the arts and the Tate, just like your aunt. O.K., now I must visit the barber; polish my shoes; see that all my shirts are clean. ’

Anne laughed. ‘But you always look perfectly fine and nicely dressed and groomed. ’

‘Thank you! You noticed. How long is it since we first met?’

Anne stared at him, ‘I . . . I’m not sure how you mean that. ’

‘I mean,’ he said, getting up to clear the table, and finding a saucer into which he put pieces of fish, which he set on the floor for Max. ‘You just admitted you noticed me, as – as a person, Anne. Not just your aunt’s tenant-in-place, or some casual visiting artist. ’

‘I’m sorry. I’m still not . . .’

After wiping his hands on a dishtowel at the sink, Michael crossed to her chair, lifted her up out of it to stand, then held her in front of him. ‘You failed to observe a very important thing. I am falling in love with you. More and more each day. ’

Anne stood within his arms, rigid and resistant.

Before she could react further he pulled her close. The kiss was long. As the warmth of his nearness flowed into her the tautness relaxed.

As they drew apart he still held her and looked down into her eyes. 'I was waiting before telling you, but . . . events are moving. Your aunt will quickly realize how I feel toward you. Beryl already has. So I think it's time you knew too.'

With both hands Anne gently pushed away from him half-turning to stare down at the floor. Vaguely she watched as Max, sitting beside the saucer, delicately licked his paws and washed his face.

In a hesitant voice, 'There doesn't seem a proper way to explain, that I'm not sure I'm ready for . . . for . . .'

'For love? For taking *all the time in the world* to find out if you want us to continue together . . . perhaps permanently?'

Anne turned her glance back to him. 'Yes. All of that. Most of all, to not lose myself again, when I'm just learning to stand on my feet, alone.'

Michael smiled. 'To love is always to lose yourself a little, my darling. And you've already proved you are perfectly fine in solo mode.'

'But . . . but . . .'

‘No buts. Just think about it. Now go wash your hands, grab your jacket and I’ll drive you home.’ With that he turned to finish moving the glasses from the table and putting them beside the sink.

‘Can’t I wash-up at least?’

‘Not now – but next time we eat here I shall certainly expect it!’ His smile was so warm as he turned to look at her she had to repress a sudden urge to walk over and hug him.

‘You are a wonderful man, Michael Tollander. Whatever happens in the future I . . . will always remember this.’

As they stood on the porch of Lady House after he helped her out of the car he looked up at the house and said, ‘You know it too, Goddess, Numen . . . Potnia. Take care of my love.’ Then with a gentle kiss to her cheek he returned to the car and drove off.

Anne stood for a moment watching his car disappear up the driveway. With a sense of wonderment she opened the door and entered the hall, to witness again a comforting delight at the golden glow of the sun down the staircase. The same feeling she had when first entering Lady House.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

As she stood on the platform, waiting for the train, Anne eagerly anticipated her aunt's imminent arrival, but felt faintly nervous too. All the discoveries she had made, all the actions they inspired, would have to be explained. Not least the involvement of Beryl, and Michael too, in the research she had caused to be put in motion.

For the past two days she had busied herself around Lady House, while Martha cleaned, polished, changed the linens, stocked the kitchen. Beryl had been called, and when told she and her husband were invited to Sunday's luncheon had accepted with pleasure. The time, of twelve noon, was relayed to the Stonegates's, to Michael, and to a few others on the list Martha gave her. She had washed, ironed, cleaned her shoes, tidied her wardrobe and drawers. When these perfunctory chores were accomplished she had sat down, and with a large notebook carefully listed all that had happened since she arrived. On a separate page were all the things she had done. On another page . . . the questions those 'doings' had raised.

The Bay of St. Ives was picture-postcard perfect in the late afternoon sunlight. At last the train was approaching. A smile of joy lit her face at the prospect of being with Vinnie once again.

'My darling! So wonderful to have *you* meet me!' They hugged and kissed before walking toward the parking lot, Anne insisting she help with the suitcase. 'And how well you look with that tan. It's amazing Anne – we are reliving the past, on holiday together, in St.Ives.'

Anne grinned. 'It is rather magical, isn't it.' Fondly she gazed at Vinnie, her singular relative, and still so attractive and vital though now in her mid-seventies. This wonderful mothering-aunt, mentor, confidante, and true friend throughout her life. Her earlier doubts slipped away. Vinnie would understand and accept.

• • •

As Anne steered the car through the entrance way in the hedge she heard a faint sigh. Glancing across she saw Vinnie smile as she sighted the house, but there was a faraway expression in her eyes. Intuitively she sensed time had just slipped farther back for Vinnie. A time forever captured in the bedroom photos; a time that had preceded her existence. Some lines of John Donne sprang to mind . . . *for love, all love of other sights controls, and*

makes one little room an everywhere. She swallowed, her eyes suddenly moist, and hastily drew Vinnie's attention to the open front door.

'There's Martha! She's so happy you are back.'

'Bless her warm heart. She's a wise woman and true friend. A real treasure in my life.'

It was obvious to Anne something customary followed, with the ritual of teatime held in the kitchen, as Martha both served and sat with them. She brightly related local happenings and farm business. Later, after she had washed the dishes and opened the door to leave, she paused to inform, 'We'll all be ready for thee at 6:30, or whenever thee make it.' Anne looked inquiringly at her aunt who smiled at her.

'A long established routine, Anne dear. After I arrive it's tea with Martha, who tells me what I should know, and the first night I dine at the farm. There are little gifts I bring from London, and I hear about their triumphs or troubles.'

'Such a nice custom, Aunt Vin.'

'The Laity's and I go back a long way together. They are like my extended family. They will be yours too . . . when you inherit Lady House.'

Anne was startled. 'Aunt Vinnie – that won't happen for years!'

'Maybe . . . but life can play tricks on us. It's good you are here now Anne. We've lots of things to cover together.'

'And . . . I have a lot to tell you, too.'

'Good! Now upstairs to unpack and freshen-up. Join me if you'd like. We'll have a glass of wine here before we walk over to Laity Farm.'

As Anne joined Vinnie in her bedroom she briefly wondered if she should comment yet on the photographs. Then quickly decided Vinnie's first evening back should be tranquil, undisturbed by questions about the past. In the days ahead they would feature largely in their discussions.

'Vin dear, a confession. I did borrow one of your Liberty scarves, for the Tate reception.'

'I'm happy you did. Borrow anything you wish. Keep it in fact. I've more things than I need. Now . . . you've seen a lot of Michael Tollander, tell me what you think about him.'

'How did . . . ? Anne stopped, and in a lowered tone, 'I suppose the Stonegate's told you about their luncheon, then the sailing trip and dinner. And Martha too would tell you . . . '

Vinnie laughed at Anne's bridled response while she folded and placed a last item into a drawer. 'This isn't London my pet, it's a Cornish village. Everyone's life is a book, to be shared and enjoyed.'

Anne composed her expression into what she hoped was bland insouciance. 'He's actually rather a nice man. I think you'll like him.' 'Anyone who adds to your life I will like.'

• • •

That evening at the farm passed in carefree laughter and humorous conversation. Each Laity exclaimed with pleasure at their gifts, especially Josh, who said his decorated denim jacket would be the envy of his friends. The pups, now frisky little black-and-white enchanters, were each cuddled in turn by Vinnie, as Millie watched her with adoring eyes.

When they left to walk home, hand in hand, Anne thought she had not felt such simple, uncomplicated happiness for a long time. Not since her sons were small boys, and life still promised a continuum of content.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Anne sat on the bench in the walled garden and quietly reflected on all the things she and her aunt had discussed yesterday. The sun felt good on her face and shoulders for there was a slight chill to the gentle breeze.

This Saturday morning, Vinnie had driven the Mini alone into St. Ives. Her purpose, she told Anne, was to visit a few friends, and then meet with Michael Tollander, at her brother's cottage, having set it up by telephone yesterday.

The subject of Beryl Penrose's friendship, her psychic abilities, her research of old records with her sister, Stella Carmarthy of the Archaeological Society, did not trouble Vinnie at all. To Anne it seemed she almost welcomed the fact it was being diligently explored, which surprised and also pleased her. Vinnie had even revealed that she herself could add a few additional incidents to those already listed. And she would welcome Beryl coming to the house sometime next week to talk further.

When Anne, with more trepidation, explained her accidental discovery of the letter from Miles Standish in a book, Vinnie asked her to

fetch it right away. As the letter was carefully withdrawn Anne observed her aunt's expression of wondering delight. Looking directly into Anne's eyes, she said: 'Miles was a fine and moral man. I loved him very much. We intended to marry. His wife, wealthy in her own right, became a semi-invalid shortly after they married, so they had no children. Had the war not upset everyone's lives he would have obtained a divorce.'

'I am really not trying to pry, Aunt Vin.' Anne quickly declared.

'I know that darling. In fact I planned to tell you about it once you grew up. Instead, I kept journals through the years, so that you could one day learn of my life and my decisions. You may read them now if you wish, or wait till I depart the scene.'

'No!' Anne said, 'Not yet. I mean – you're not leaving me for a long time, so I can wait to read them. But . . . we can now talk about things occasionally, can't we? Without the need to hide any truths?'

'Of course. And so we shall.'

'What I really want is for you to talk about those pictures in your bedroom, describe all those happy weekends. And tell me too about my parents at that time.'

Vinnie laughed and nodded her head. 'We have lots of things to cover in the days ahead. But right now I'd like a drink. Then we shall listen to the evening news, and have our dinner.'

. . .

Sunday dawned, and the sunny weather prevailed, not too hot, not too cool. When breakfast had been eaten and cleared, Vinnie retired to the lounge. Rosie and Martha began bustling around the kitchen, unloading packages they had brought from the farm, removing things from the refrigerator, and preparing platters for the luncheon. Peter and Josh were busy in the large front dining room, moving chairs away to the walls. They had unearthed small tables and chairs from the further reaches of the garage and set them out on the front terrace.

Anne was soon ordered by Martha to 'go get yee-self gussied-up and leave everything to us.' So she did. Upstairs from her wardrobe she withdrew the new blue dress purchased in Penzance, and not yet worn.. Slimly draped in a silky material the faint paisley design was a soft shade of blue, the color of the Hydrangeas that still grew wild in Cornwall. When she slowly descended the stairs, in the matching blue strapped shoes, she wore a confident smile.

Before the hour of noon arrived the dining table had been set with dishes of cold chicken in a Caesar sauce, dressed crab and shrimp, thin slices of cold beef, horseradish and home-made chutney, green salad, potato salad, assorted finely sliced vegetables, platters of fresh fruits, assorted cheeses, breads and crackers. On the sideboard sat a huge bowl of sherry trifle, two large Battenburg cakes, and brandy snap biscuits. Another side table held the bottles of spirits and wines.

It looked like a resplendent feast Anne's admiring eyes. Then Vinnie appeared. After a quick check that the luncheon buffet was complete she complimented Anne on her appearance and suggested they have a glass of champagne together. Their private toast before the guests arrived.

• • •

Today Lady House was alive with conversation and laughter. Reunions were acknowledged, introductions made, recollections exchanged and news passed along, as people drifted in through the front door, which would remain open. The guests happily dispersed themselves between the front patio and the dining room with drinks in hand and lots to talk about, before they eventually claimed a plate and sampled the luncheon fare.

A voice was suddenly raised, and Colonel Amberthy hailed Vinnie across the dining room, 'Looks like some more guests just arrived, m'dear, though I don't recognize these 'uns.'

Anne, who was standing in a far corner of the dining room chatting to Beryl and her husband John, with Michael beside her, looked up. At once her face froze in shocked astonishment. She stared, as Brian Fellowes stood hesitantly in the doorway, then sighting her walked slowly forward. Michael, whose gaze had been on her face while she spoke, reacted. He moved close and was about to speak when she thrust her glass at him, and quickly moved forward to meet the man advancing across the room.

'Brian! Why are you here? Has something happened?'

Alan's younger brother might be described as a pleasant looking individual. Always somewhat diffident in manner, even shy, he now looked decidedly embarrassed. Though vaguely resembling Alan physically he lacked his brother's confident air and self-assured manner.

'Anne dear, I'm – I mean we're sorry to intrude like this. We couldn't know you'd be having a big party. But . . . well . . . Alan's with me, outside in the car. He's come down specially. He has to talk to you.'

Standing stock still Anne studied Brian's face. Michael, now behind her shoulder said, 'What is it Anne? How may I help?'

Vinnie, who had calmly walked across the room toward them, wearing a faint smile, said with impeccable social aplomb, 'Good afternoon. It's Brian Fellowes isn't it?. I recall meeting you once, many years ago.'

Brian, with increasingly obvious discomfort, opened his mouth to reply, but everyone's attention suddenly veered towards the doorway again. There, the second figure to appear stood with casual nonchalance, slowly surveying the room, before he glanced toward the four individuals who now stared at him.

With the trace of a smile Alan Fellowes slowly walked towards them. That he had briefly gained the attentive audience of the entire room did not perturb him at all. Those who had initially fallen silent now began to quietly talk with each other again. The faint chatter from the terrace outside could still be heard.

'Sorry Isabelle. Didn't know you were down here too. But as I always say – if you're going to crash a party, make sure it's a good one!'

With head tilted up, and a bleak expression Michael had not observed before, Anne said, 'How did you find us?'

'Not hard at all in these parts. "Isabelle Stratton of Lady House" is rather well known. My apologies and all that, Isabelle, but I didn't have a phone number. And I really do need to speak with Anne.'

Vinnie, in a firm voice, but still with a polite expression said, 'Take them along to the back garden Anne. I shall come and join you later.'

Quickly putting her hand on Michael's arm, to forestall him from following she said, 'Come along with me Michael. Estelle Bryant is muddled about plein aire painting. You come too, Beryl and John – you'll enjoy her sense of humor.'

• • •

In the kitchen Martha and Rosie looked up in surprise to see Anne, with Brian and Alan following, walk to the door and out into the garden. As they passed, Alan glanced toward the two ladies with a smile and directed an affable 'Hello!' their way.

Once outside the two men stood and looked about them in awkward silence until Anne stiffly suggested they sit down on the bench. She stood a few feet away rather than share the same seating and looked directly at Alan.

'I understand our lawyers are the only contact we should have with each other now. Mine is here today. I can ask him to join us.'

'Oh come off it, Anne! You know I wouldn't be here unless it was urgent. It was the only way to get through to you. Adam called you last week to explain my problem – but you brushed him away.'

Brian suddenly rose from the bench. 'Look, while you two talk, I'll just wander around the garden if I may.'

Icily Anne replied, 'I didn't brush Alan way, only the suggestion I sacrifice the roof over my head. I notice your so-called problem didn't impede you buying an airline ticket, or driving to Cornwall.'

'I flew Economy. Brian met me at the airport and drove us down.'

Anne stood silent while Alan stared back at her from the bench. Then with an expressive sigh, he spread his hands, 'Look. Right now my back's to the wall at Fellowtronics. That house is a viable chunk of money that could swing the tide. You *know* you won't want to keep living there. *Think* about it! Once the firm's back on its feet I *guarantee* the money will be repaid. You can buy something of equal value. My lawyers can write it up immediately.'

Anne, now a little unsteady on her feet, slowly stepped toward the far end of the bench to sit, leaving a decided space between them.

Staring straight ahead at the garden wall she said, 'After twenty-eight years I simply don't care anymore – about you, your company, or your problems. I worked hard to help you get started, and tried to create a happy family. It's over, done with. I'm free. With just the house as settlement. Now you want that too?'

Alan's mouth set in a hard line. 'Oh for god's sake, Anne, do you think I enjoy this? Groveling? It's a *loan!* That house is worth over a quarter of a million dollars. And you'll be repaid.'

'With what? Shares in a faltering company? And when?'

His normally confident smile became a sneer. 'You're not suffering much right now, are you? You've got your aunt to fall back on – and this house looks pretty comfortable to me.'

'Leave my aunt out of it!' In sudden anger Anne abruptly stood up and stepped past him, past the kitchen door, until reaching the covered entry to the cellar. Reaching out her hand to the stonework for balance she paused before turning to face Alan again. As though the stone was sending a stream of warm energy upwards into her arm, a strange calm began to descend around her, dissipating her anger. It felt as though two hands had lightly, lovingly, rested upon her shoulders. Slowly she turned to face Alan. In a different, measured tone, that expressed no emotion, she spoke.

'I shall think about it. After consulting my solicitor, I will let you know. Right now I think. . .'

The sound of the kitchen door being opened drew not only Alan's and Anne's eyes toward it but also Brian's, who was returning from his circuit of the garden and stood level with the gate in the wall across from them.

Isabelle Stratton stepped out and in a pleasant, if firm and decisive voice, quickly looked at all of them in turn before declaring, 'I think it is time you both left now, Alan and Brian. Whereabouts are you staying, may I ask?'

Alan got to his feet. He looked at her with an abject if still defiant expression. 'We're at a B & B in St. Ives. It's across the road from – what's that beach called Brian?'

'Porthminster, lovely golden sands.' Brian, still discomforted in manner hastily added, 'This is such a beautiful old walled garden here.'

'Yes it is.' Vinnie said, 'You have our telephone number so you'll be in touch again I'm sure. Now let me show you back to your car this way.'

She walked toward the far gate and opened it. 'Oh, Anne – do go and find Beryl, she wants to see you before she leaves. Michael too.'

Anne, still with a faintly bemused feeling, walked toward the kitchen door to enter the kitchen, then immediately encountered Michael who was striding towards her.

'Anne! Are you alright?' He anxiously studied her face, his hands reaching out to hold hers. As she looked up into his warm brown eyes, so very different to Alan's cold blue gaze, a new flood of emotion swept her. So easy it would be to move close to him, to receive his embrace. Yet that

mystical steadyng touch on her shoulders in the garden now served to hold her back, maintain her own calm independence.

'I'm all right, Michael. Sorry about this unwelcome intrusion. Has it upset Vinnie's lunch party very much?'

'No – just me. Everyone else is still having a fine time. Let me get you something to eat.'

With a firm hand on her elbow he steered her out of the kitchen and toward the front rooms, where the sound of many happy voices was an added comfort for her.
